

**Governing Through Testing: The History, Implementation, and Impact of English  
Language Proficiency Policy in Canadian Immigration and Higher Education**

by

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**Abstract**

This dissertation critically examines the role of standardized English language proficiency testing in Canadian immigration and higher education policy. While language tests such as International English Language Testing System (IELTS), Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL), Canadian English Language Proficiency Index Program (CELPIP), and Duolingo are often framed as objective measures of communicative ability, this research interrogates their use as political and institutional tools of governance. Drawing on theories of governmentality, neoliberalism, and linguistic imperialism, the dissertation explores how language proficiency testing requirements shape access to education, geographic, academic, and socioeconomic mobility, and citizenship.

The study is presented in a grouped manuscript format and consists of three related papers. The first manuscript offers a historical policy analysis of Canadian immigration language requirements from the 1960s to the present. Using archival documents and government records, it shows how standardized language testing emerged as a strategic policy instrument to manage immigrant selection and align with shifting national economic priorities. The second manuscript analyzes language policy developments at the University of Manitoba from 1959 to 2023. It draws on institutional records and academic calendars to trace the university's move from internal assessments to reliance on external standardized tests. This transition is shown to reflect broader pressures related to internationalization, marketization, and institutional risk management. The third manuscript presents findings from a qualitative study involving interviews and artifact elicitation with 12 international students. Through thematic analysis, it documents students' emotional, financial, and academic challenges related to language testing, while highlighting their strategies of resistance and critique.

Together, these three studies offer a multi-scalar perspective on the evolution, implementation, and lived effects of English language proficiency testing in Canada. The dissertation concludes that language testing policies are not neutral or purely academic instruments, but mechanisms that reflect and reproduce global inequalities and neoliberal governance logics. It calls for more equitable, context-sensitive approaches to language assessment in both immigration and higher education and contributes to ongoing scholarly efforts to reframe language requirements policy through a critical, justice-oriented lens.

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**Dedication**

To my mom and dad,  
my husband Paul,  
and my son Noah—  
with all my love.

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## Chapter 1: Introduction

English language proficiency has emerged as a central mechanism for regulating access to education, employment, and migration in Canada's increasingly globalized policy landscape. Standardized tests such as the International English Language Testing System (IELTS), Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL), Canadian English Language Proficiency Index Program (CELPIP), and more recently, Duolingo, are widely used to determine eligibility for study permits, permanent residency, and employment pathways. While often presented as objective and neutral measures of communicative ability, these assessments are embedded in broader sociopolitical, economic, and institutional agendas (Kunnan, 2018; Shohamy, 2020).

Scholars in applied linguistics, language policy, and critical education studies have extensively interrogated the rise of standardized English testing. Shohamy (2020) introduced the concept of *critical language testing* to uncover the ideological underpinnings of testing regimes that claim neutrality. Others, including McNamara (2012), McNamara and Roever (2006), and Kunnan (2018), have argued that language tests are not just technical tools, but deeply political mechanisms that uphold dominant linguistic hierarchies. In global contexts, tests like IELTS and TOEFL have been critiqued for their roots in colonial language ideologies (Phillipson, 1992), their market-driven expansion (Brunner, 2017; Pearson, 2023), and their role in reinforcing English as a form of global linguistic capital (Kubota, 2016; Zeng, Ponce, & Li, 2023).

In the Canadian context, English proficiency testing is uniquely situated at the intersection of immigration and education policy. Canada's use of standardized English tests in immigration began in earnest in the early 2000s as part of a broader shift to human capital-centered selection models (Abu-Laban et al., 2022; Ferrer et al., 2014). Tests such as IELTS and CELPIP are now mandatory for many economic immigration streams, increasingly required by

Canadian universities for international admissions, and most recently required for Post-Graduation Work Permit applicants who have already studied in Canada, effective November 1, 2024 (Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada [IRCC], 2024). These developments reflect a convergence of neoliberal logics across policy domains, where language proficiency becomes a proxy for productivity, adaptability, and integration potential (Brown, 2015; Guo, 2013; Holborow, 2018). Language thus becomes not only a marker of academic readiness but a filter for economic worth.

Critics have argued that these testing practices reproduce systemic inequalities along racial, linguistic, and class lines. Flores and Rosa's (2015) theory of racialized linguistic ideologies explains how language policies often privilege standardized white middle-class English norms while marginalizing multilingual, racialized speakers. In immigration, Abu-Laban and Gabriel (2002) show how seemingly race-neutral requirements like language proficiency operate as de facto exclusionary criteria. More recent analyses reinforce this dynamic, Abu-Laban (2024) highlights its persistence in framing immigrants through skill narratives; policy critiques (e.g., PICUM, 2024) document how language requirements serve as structural gatekeepers; and workplace studies (Back, 2024) reveal their tangible impact in everyday professional life.

Within higher education, similar dynamics unfold through internationalization policies. As provincial governments cut funding and universities turned to international student recruitment as a revenue stream, admissions processes were restructured to balance market expansion with perceived academic risk (McCartney, 2021; Stein & de Andreotti, 2017). In the Canadian context, universities have adopted corporate governance structures that embed market logics into all levels of institutional practice, including admissions (Bozheva, 2020; Busch,

2017). However, these changes have deepened structural inequities, disproportionately affecting low-income students, international applicants, and historically marginalized groups who face rising costs and systemic exclusion (Brathwaite, 2017; Busch, 2017; Kariwo, 2023; Oduwaye, Kiraz, & Sorakin, 2023; Shohamy, 2020; Tomlinson, 2018). Rather than fulfilling promises of inclusion and access, neoliberal reforms have amplified structural barriers under the guise of modernization, efficiency, and global competitiveness (Brunner, 2022; Stein, 2018).

Standardized language testing became central to this balancing act, framed as a neutral way to guarantee quality while also serving the market need for scalable, quick assessments. Rather than acting as inclusive access points, these tests often function as commercial gatekeeping mechanisms (Shohamy, 2006, 2020; Pearson, 2023). This commodification of English reflects neoliberal shifts in university governance and global competition for students.

Despite these growing critiques, gaps remain in the literature. First, few studies have traced the historical evolution of standardized language testing in Canadian immigration and higher education policy. Second, while there is important research on test-taker outcomes, less attention has been paid to how students themselves interpret and respond to testing regimes, particularly from an affective and embodied standpoint. Third, there is a need to connect these national and institutional dynamics with students' lived experiences to understand how language testing governs emotions, identities, and life choices.

This dissertation addresses these gaps by critically examining the evolution, function, and consequences of English language proficiency requirements policies across Canadian immigration and higher education. Using a multi-scalar lens, the study connects federal policy, institutional practice, and individual experience to show how standardized testing operates as a technology of governance.

Theoretically, the research is grounded in Foucault's concept of governmentality, which frames modern power as operating through dispersed, self-regulating practices rather than direct coercion (Foucault, 1991). Language testing is approached as one such practice, producing docile bodies and governable subjects through discipline, surveillance, and normalization (Foucault, 1995). Neoliberalism, as conceptualized by Brown (2015) and Ong (2006), is also central, particularly in how it positions individuals as entrepreneurial actors responsible for their own linguistic capital and success. Finally, the project draws on critical language testing theory (Shohamy, 2020) and critiques of linguistic imperialism (Phillipson, 1992; Zeng & Yang, 2024) to interrogate how global English testing regimes shape what counts as legitimate language, knowledge, and personhood.

The first manuscript, *Language Requirements in Canadian Immigration Policy: Testing as a Mechanism for Government Control* (Chapter 2), provides a historical analysis of Canadian immigration policy from the 1960s to the present. Drawing on archival and policy documents, it traces how language requirements have evolved alongside neoliberal and settler-colonial rationalities. The analysis argues that standardized testing functions as a racialized filter aligned with economic productivity discourses.

The second manuscript, *Standardizing Access: The Neoliberal Restructuring of Language Proficiency Policy and Practice at the University of Manitoba* (Chapter 3), is an institutional case study drawing on archival materials from 1959 to 2023, including university calendars and policy documents. It traces the shift from informal, in-house language assessments to the adoption and expansion of external standardized tests, showing how marketization, budgetary pressures, and international student recruitment shaped language policy decisions under neoliberal governance.

The third manuscript, *Beyond the Test: International Students Navigating Language Policy at a Canadian University* (Chapter 4), centers the experiences of 12 international students at the University of Manitoba as they navigate the institutional and emotional demands of English language proficiency testing. Drawing on interviews and artifact elicitation, it examines how students encounter testing as a form of affective governance that shapes their emotions, finances, academic preparation, and sense of linguistic legitimacy. The analysis identifies four interconnected themes, emotional strain, financial burden, misalignment between test preparation and academic realities, and institutional surveillance, alongside the strategies students develop to navigate these pressures. These dynamics are interpreted through the lenses of neoliberalism and linguistic imperialism, showing how testing constructs students as self-managing, entrepreneurial subjects in pursuit of mobility and legitimacy.

Together, these manuscripts offer a comprehensive and critical account of how standardized language testing functions as a multi-scalar mechanism of governance in Canada, shaping immigration selection, institutional admissions policies, and students' lived experiences. They demonstrate that language proficiency, framed as objective and necessary, is in practice deeply political and contested, shaped by the historical evolution of immigration and higher education policy, the marketization and standardization of institutional practices, and the emotional, financial, and academic pressures experienced by international students within neoliberal and linguistic imperialist regimes.

The manuscripts appear in Chapters 2, 3, and 4, each prepared in accordance with the stylistic expectations of their respective intended publication venues. APA formatting has been applied throughout the thesis in alignment with the *Publication Manual of the American Psychological Association* (7th ed.; American Psychological Association, 2020). For consistency,

abstracts were removed from each manuscript. Chapter 2 is being prepared for publication as a book chapter on critical immigration policy or settler-colonial governance. A proposal based on Chapter 3 has been submitted to the Special Issue of the *International Journal for Leadership in Learning*. Chapter 4 is being prepared for submission to a peer-reviewed journal specializing in language policy, applied linguistics, or international student research. Chapter 5 concludes the thesis by synthesizing the key findings and outlining implications for more equitable and critically informed language assessment practices.

### **Research Positionality**

This dissertation is grounded in my intersecting experiences as a former instructor of standardized English language tests, a multilingual speaker, an international student, and an immigrant to Canada. For several years, I taught standardized test preparation courses, helping students navigate the very systems I later encountered myself as a test-taker. These dual perspectives, as both facilitator and subject, shape my critical engagement with language policy.

My interest in high-stakes English language testing in Canadian higher education and immigration is shaped by my evolving experiences as a test-taker, educator, and doctoral student. I began my academic journey as an English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learner, navigating the emotional and financial pressures of preparing for standardized tests that functioned as conditions for admission to Canadian universities and, later, for immigration eligibility. These overlapping roles, combined with my transition from international student to permanent resident, have deepened my understanding of how language proficiency policies operate not only within academic institutions but also across broader immigration frameworks.

These experiences have shaped my engagement with participants and my interpretation of their narratives, particularly in the accounts presented in Chapter 4. Rather than viewing my subjectivity as a limitation, I embrace it as a source of critical insight, empathy, and transparency. Following Kayı-Aydar (2019), I acknowledge that my position inevitably influences what I perceive as meaningful data and how I interpret participants' accounts.

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## **Chapter 2: Language Requirements in Canadian Immigration Policy: Testing as a Mechanism for Government Control**

Over the past three decades, the phenomenon of human mobility, including migration and immigration, has garnered substantial scholarly attention. This attention reflects the significant increase in global migration, with the International Organization for Migration (2021) reporting that nearly 281 million people reside outside their countries of origin, despite increasingly restrictive immigration policies designed to regulate these flows (Solimano, 2010). North America, particularly Canada, has become a primary destination for many of these individuals.

Canada, a settler colony built on land taken from Indigenous peoples, is often hailed as a “land of immigration,” and has welcomed over 17 million immigrants since Confederation in 1867 (Statistics Canada, 2016). However, this narrative erases the historical and current presence of Indigenous peoples. Canada’s immigration history is marked by colonization woven with government policies that enabled the dispossession of Indigenous peoples (Abu-Laban, Tungohan & Gabriel, 2022) and enlisted the gatekeeping of immigrants.

By the late 1950s and early 1960s, Canada’s economic boom necessitated a shift in immigration policy, transitioning from race-based to skills-based selection (Ellermann, 2021). Prior to this shift, a “whites only regime,” openly discriminated against non-white applicants (Sharma, 2020). The introduction of the Points-Based Assessment (PBA) system in the 1967 Immigration Act marked a significant milestone, emphasizing education, skills, age, employment, and language proficiency instead of race. However, by privileging English and French the PBA continued to disadvantage speakers of other languages, embedding linguistic discrimination within the new selection system (Heller & McElhinny, 2017). While this system

represented progress, as Sharma (2020) argues, systemic discrimination persists, as immigrants with international qualifications continue to face barriers upon settlement.

Central to the PBA was the introduction of language testing, which quickly became a tool for shaping immigration flows. These tests privileged Canada's colonial languages, English and French, by assessing applicants' abilities to read, write, speak, and understand their language. Framed as a key to successful integration into Canadian society (Huot et al., 2020), these requirements reinforced colonial norms, determining who could belong to the nation (Heller & McElhinny, 2017). Language tests, viewed as policymaking tools in complex political matters, have shaped the narrative of immigration policies in various countries, often marginalizing and excluding those who do not conform to these linguistic and cultural standards (Shohamy, 2001).

Although there is a rich body of scholarship on the history of Canadian immigration policy (e.g., Knowles, 2016; Kelley & Trebilcock, 2010; Triadafilopoulos, 2013), language requirements are often mentioned only in passing and rarely analyzed as mechanisms of governance. Conversely, research on language testing in applied linguistics and education has offered critical perspectives on the political uses of assessment (e.g., Shohamy, 2001, 2020; McNamara & Roever, 2006) yet tends to focus on contemporary testing practices without historicizing how such tools became embedded in immigration systems.

This study brings these two areas into conversation by tracing the historical evolution of language testing in Canadian immigration policy and analyzing how language requirements have functioned as technologies of power across time. Specifically, it asks: How have language requirements for immigration to Canada evolved since the introduction of the Points-Based Assessment system in 1967? In what ways do these requirements reflect broader socio-political forces, including neoliberalism, and gendered forms of governance? In doing so, the study offers

a novel application of Foucault's governmentality and Shohamy's critical language testing to a context that is both historically situated and politically consequential.

### **Theoretical Lens**

Drawing on Foucault's concept of governmentality (Burchell, Gordon & Miller.,1991) and Shohamy's (2020) insights into the power dynamics of language testing, these frameworks are used to unravel the complexities of Canadian immigration policies, particularly their language requirements. The analysis highlights the persistent gender disparities within policy changes, and a discernible shift towards neoliberal ideologies that emphasize measurable human capital. These issues form a multifaceted and dynamic tapestry that demands a critical examination of their impact on diverse communities and the broader societal landscape, ultimately underscoring the need for a comprehensive understanding of Canadian immigration policies and their implications from a language requirement perspective.

### **Foucault's Concept of Power and Governmentality**

Foucault coined the term "governmentality" to encapsulate the intricate intersection of governance and mental frameworks (Burchell et al., 1991). Foucault argued that unravelling the complexities of power technologies necessitates delving into the political rationality underlying these various mechanisms of influence. Understanding how governing practices intertwine with prevailing modes of thought offers insights into the nuanced dynamics of power (Foucault, 1977). Foucault views government as the "conduct of conduct" (Foucault, 1982, p. 220-221), which applies to governing the self and the governing of others, with governmentality signifying the reciprocal influence between the contemporary sovereign state and the independent modern individual.

Foucault's concepts of power and governmentality help us see how the modern era has given rise to a distinctive mode of control that profoundly shapes individual subjectivity, the essence of selfhood. In this contemporary paradigm, the state exercises a refined yet pervasive power over minds and bodies. Departing from traditional methods that rely on overt coercion, the modern state employs diverse strategies, rendering direct force unnecessarily. Instead, it harnesses statistics, measures of human capital, and numerical data as knowledge forms (Foucault, 1982). The state effectively supervises and surveils individuals, influencing their behaviours and choices through these technologies of power. The modern state's governing capacity extends beyond the physical realm, permeating how individuals perceive and define themselves within society. This intricate interplay among statistical knowledge, governance techniques, and individual subjectivity underscores the evolving dynamics of power in contemporary socio-political landscapes.

Analyzing Canadian immigration policies through Foucault's lens of governmentality reveals an understanding that surpasses conventional views of state control. Foucault's (1982) framework provides a paradigm to comprehend societal complexities across temporal dimensions. Genealogy, knowledge, and power are central to his theoretical apparatus, challenging the conventional notions of truth and objectivity. Seeking a critical history of thought, Foucault (1993) reveals how power relations are entwined with universal truths and their subjugating impact. His genealogical approach emphasizes historicizing thought to expose the dominant discourses that shape perceptions of normalcy.

The theory of governmentality explores the historical construction of Western governance, tracing the modern state's roots in pastoral power and Christian discourse. Foucault's insights reveal the dual nature of power, individualizing and totalizing, shaping

citizens' lives towards economic prosperity and worldly salvation. The convergence of neoliberalism and governance further complicates this landscape, with the government orchestrating societal arrangements for economic prosperity within the tenets of the market (Foucault, 1995). The interplay between governmentality and neoliberalism, as defined by Foucault (2008) as political rationality and a form of governmentality rather than merely a set of economic policies, prompts a critical examination of how these truth regimes coexist and influence immigration policies, specifically language requirements, unveiling a complex web of power dynamics (Rabinow, 2023).

### ***Gendered Dimensions of Neoliberal Governmentality***

While neoliberalism is often framed as a gender-neutral logic of governance, feminist political economists have shown that it systematically devalues social reproduction forms of labour such as caregiving, domestic work, and informal support networks that are disproportionately performed by women (Bakker & Gill, 2003; Fraser, 2013). Immigration systems rooted in neoliberal rationality tend to reward economic independence, language proficiency, and formal employment histories, criteria that reflect masculinized forms of productivity while marginalizing relational, care-based, or feminized labour. This renders immigrant women, particularly those entering through family class or caregiving pathways, structurally disadvantaged. As such, gender inequality is not a byproduct of immigration policy, but an integral outcome of neoliberal governance, which encodes gendered assumptions into the logic of human capital valuation itself.

### **Shohamy's Perspective of Power within the Tests as Policy Making Tools**

Shohamy (2020) challenges the conventional view of language tests as neutral, highlighting their role as tools for political and social control. In the Canadian immigration context, her perspective encourages examining how language tests intertwine with societal dynamics and policy motives, rather than viewing them as separate and objective entities. Building on Foucault's concept of examinations as techniques of hierarchical observation, Shohamy (2020) extended this idea to show how language tests contribute to normalization, judgment, and control. She emphasizes that language tests, administered by powerful institutions and presented with scientific objectivity, gain symbolic power through numerical results, reinforcing notions of rationality and legitimacy (Foucault, 1995; Shohamy, 2020). This illusion of objective truth influences test-takers' perceptions and reinforces control, echoing Foucault's emphasis on written records as tools of discipline (Foucault, 1995).

Shohamy (2020) also argued that policymakers use language tests as cost-effective instruments to control immigration, regulate work opportunities, and determine access to citizenship. These tests reveal bureaucratic agendas and broader societal influences, related to ideologies, diversity, and economic factors. By drawing on the theorizing of Foucault and Shohamy, the analysis critically examines the intersections of governance, language, and neoliberal ideologies, highlighting gender imbalances, and the concomitant emphasis on human capital.

### **Methodology**

This study employed document analysis as the primary method to explore the evolution of language requirements in Canadian immigration policies from the late 1960s to 2023.

Document analysis, as a qualitative research method, enables systematic examination and interpretation of textual data to elicit meaning, develop understanding, and generate empirical knowledge (Bowen, 2009). Document analysis was chosen for its suitability in systematically examining historical and contemporary policy texts (Bowen, 2009). This approach was complemented by a thematic analysis framework (Fereday & Muir-Cochrane, 2006), which allowed for both emergent insights and theory-guided interpretation of language requirements as they evolved over time. Given the availability of archival and policy documents, this approach was well suited to examine how socio-political and economic forces shaped language requirements.

### **Data Sources**

The data sources for this study included a range of archival and contemporary documents relevant to Canadian immigration policies. Archival materials, such as Immigration Acts, ministerial instructions, Order-in-Councils, and parliamentary records from the late 1960s to 2023, were central to tracing historical developments. Policy and program records, including operational manuals and guidelines from Immigration, Refugees, and Citizenship Canada (IRCC), provided insights into procedural and regulatory changes. Historical reports and publications from Library and Archives Canada (LAC) and the Canadian Museum of Immigration at Pier 21 offered additional context and depth. Other significant sources included parliamentary committee proceedings, issues from the Canada Gazette Archive, and official statements by government officials.

These sources, detailed in Table 1 (Appendix A), provided a comprehensive foundation for analyzing the evolution of language proficiency requirements in immigration policies. Documents were included based on their relevance, with priority given to those explicitly

addressing language proficiency requirements, immigration policy changes, or related regulatory frameworks. The timeframe for selection spanned from 1960 onward to capture policy shifts from the postwar period to contemporary immigration regulations. To ensure credibility, the study primarily relied on government-issued documents, parliamentary records, and reports from official archives. Availability and accessibility also played a key role in the selection process, with sources screened based on their presence in institutional archives, government databases, and online repositories.

Documents that were excluded primarily included internal government communications, unpublished drafts of policy proposals, and records requiring special access permissions, such as Cabinet confidences or internal memos not released under access to information legislation. In some cases, older historical documents that were referenced in secondary sources could not be retrieved due to digitization gaps or archival restrictions. While the exclusion of these materials may have limited insight into some behind-the-scenes decision-making processes, the study focused on publicly available policy instruments such as legislation, ministerial instructions, and operational manuals, which are the official mechanisms through which language requirements are enacted and enforced. These documents were sufficient for analyzing the historical evolution and public rationale of language testing policies in Canadian immigration. Given the focus on publicly implemented policy, these materials were sufficient for tracing major shifts in language requirements over time.

The screening process began with an initial broad search using institutional databases such as Library and Archives Canada, the IRCC's Open Government Portal, the Canada Gazette online archive, and Hansard parliamentary records. Searches were conducted using a combination of keywords such as "language proficiency," "language testing," "immigration

policy,” “IELTS,” “CELPIP,” “Points-Based System,” and “language requirements.” These keywords were used alone and in combination to capture a wide range of relevant documents from 1960 to 2023.

After the initial search, documents were reviewed for relevance based on their content, publication source, and connection to federal immigration policy. Documents that explicitly addressed language requirements, testing frameworks, or shifts in immigration selection criteria were prioritized. In addition to primary policy documents, secondary sources such as academic policy analyses, reports by immigration think tanks, and historical studies were consulted to verify and contextualize key policy developments.

Some challenges included inconsistent terminology across decades (e.g., “language knowledge” vs. “language proficiency”), gaps in digitized records from earlier periods, and the evolving structure of federal repositories. When multiple sources referenced the same document, cross-checking was used to ensure accuracy. Despite these limitations, the dataset assembled was sufficient to trace the major policy shifts

### **Analytical Process**

This study employed a hybrid thematic analysis approach that combined deductive and inductive methods (Bowen, 2009; Fereday & Muir-Cochrane, 2006) to examine how Canadian immigration policies have historically constructed and deployed language requirements. This approach allowed for both theory-informed analysis and the identification of emergent patterns from the data. The analysis was guided by the study’s theoretical frameworks, particularly Foucault’s concept of governmentality and Shohamy’s critical language testing to examine how

language testing functioned not merely as an assessment tool but as a mechanism of governance and social control.

Deductive coding was conducted using pre-established theoretical categories derived from the literature on governmentality, neoliberalism, and critical language testing. These codes included terms such as “standardization,” “economic productivity,” “human capital,” “regulation,” and “surveillance.” To apply these theory-driven codes systematically, I conducted an initial screening of documents using targeted keyword searches (e.g., “language proficiency,” “IELTS,” “TEF,” “CLB,” “points-based assessment”) across sources such as ministerial instructions, Immigration Acts, IRCC operational manuals, and parliamentary proceedings. Relevant segments were extracted and coded with close attention paid to how language policies invoked principles of meritocracy, employability, and integration as conditions of national belonging. The codes were refined through multiple rounds of review to ensure alignment with the theoretical framework and research questions.

In parallel, inductive coding allowed for the identification of unanticipated but recurring themes. As documents were reviewed, emergent patterns such as the financial burden of repeated testing, the differential treatment of applicants based on language background, and implicit assumptions about linguistic and cultural superiority were coded without pre-existing categories. These insights reflected how language requirements were rationalized over time and how they intersected with broader discourses of race, gender, and citizenship. New inductive codes were added iteratively and grouped into broader thematic categories to capture these evolving patterns.

Together, the deductive and inductive coding processes were used to cluster patterns across time periods, policy changes, and document types. The analysis moved beyond isolated policy shifts to examine the underlying logics that informed these changes. This approach helped

reveal the institutionalization of language testing as a political technology that both reflects and reinforces dominant power structures.

To ensure rigor, triangulation was achieved by analyzing data from diverse sources, including parliamentary records, archival materials, and government publications. This strategy helped corroborate the findings and provided a more comprehensive understanding of the documents. While document analysis provided a robust foundation for this research, potential limitations were acknowledged, such as the possibility of omitted details or selective perspectives within some documents. Archival materials, such as ministerial instructions or early immigration guidelines, often lacked accompanying explanations or rationale. To interpret these documents meaningfully, I cross-referenced them with parliamentary debates, policy commentaries, or historical timelines to clarify their context and intent.

### **Tracing the Emergence of Immigration and Language Policies**

Although Canada became a formal nation-state in 1867, colonial settlement and immigration policies were established much earlier, grounded in the occupation of Indigenous lands and the assimilation of newcomers into dominant religious, linguistic, and cultural norms (Abu-Laban et al., 2022; Knowles, 2016). Early immigration frameworks privileged white, Christian, and European settlers, while exploiting racialized labour through slavery and indentured work (Cooper, 2007; Roy, 1989; Whitfield, 2016). These policies entrenched racial hierarchies and excluded non-European migrants through legislation such as the Chinese Head Tax and the Continuous Journey Regulation (Bashford, 2003; Knowles, 2016). By the mid-20th century, assimilationist logic continued to shape policy through discretionary assessments of cultural and linguistic “fit,” laying the groundwork for future language-based selection

(Satzewich, 2015; Triadafilopoulos, 2013). A summary of these developments is presented in Table 2 (see Appendix B), which contextualizes the policy analysis that follows.

### **The Transition to Skills-Based Immigration: Introducing the Points-Based System**

The Points-Based Assessment (PBA), still used in Canada and other countries such as Australia, the UK, New Zealand, and Denmark (Anwar, 2014), sets criteria for selecting immigrants based on education, occupation, language skills, and work experience. Though it was introduced as a way to make selection more objective, scholars have questioned how these criteria may still reflect systemic inequities and reproduce social stratification (Ferrer, Picot, & Riddell, 2014; Guo & Guo, 2015). This study focuses on the late 1960s onward, when the PBA was introduced and language became a key selection factor.

Canada's 1967 Immigration Reform Act marked a major policy shift, replacing racial and ethnic selection with criteria reflecting human capital, including language proficiency. Although presented as progressive, the new framework restructured existing hierarchies by favouring English and French speakers, especially those from European backgrounds (Green & Green, 1999; Kelley & Trebilcock, 2010). Language became a formalized criterion within the selection process, reinforcing colonial and linguistic dominance under the guise of economic rationality.

Order in Council 1967-1616 outlined selection categories such as education, training, age, arranged employment, and knowledge of English or French. Language proficiency, though one of several factors, played a decisive role. Table 3 (Appendix C) shows how language was weighted in the initial PBA model. No detailed records explain how scores were assigned, but archived House of Commons and Senate documents offer partial insight.

Importantly, the introduction of language testing coincided with broader state-led projects to define national identity. The 1969 White Paper on Indigenous Affairs sought to dismantle Indigenous sovereignty under the guise of assimilation (Coulthard, 2014), while federal multiculturalism policies maintained English and French as the only sanctioned languages of national belonging (Mackey, 2005; Thobani, 2007). These simultaneous developments reveal how language requirements in immigration were part of a wider strategy of erasure, regulation, and control.

Parliamentary committee records from the late 1960s further illustrate how language was embedded in immigration decision-making. Assistant Deputy Minister Curry stated that knowledge of English or French was “not only a matter of importance in reviewing competence,” but also earned applicants additional points (House of Commons Committees, 1968, p. 78). Yet these assessments were inconsistent and highly subjective. One committee member recounted an applicant downgraded for unclear reasons “his English is not good enough for me” before being reassessed and awarded a perfect score (House of Commons Committees, 1968, p. 226). These examples expose the lack of standardization in early language evaluations, revealing how officer discretion could shape outcomes based on implicit judgments about accent, fluency, or perceived “fit,” rather than objective criteria. Such discretionary practices risk reproducing systemic bias by allowing personal, cultural, or racialized assumptions to influence who was deemed linguistically competent and thus eligible for immigration.

The Points-Based Assessment (PBA) redefined Canadian immigration by prioritizing human capital over racial and ethnic exclusions. However, its emphasis on language proficiency reinforced existing hierarchies, privileging applicants fluent in English or French while marginalizing others (Green & Green, 1999; Guo & Guo, 2015). Although framed as an

objective economic measure, language assessment remained subjective, with inconsistencies in its application (House of Commons Committees, 1968). This policy shift aligned with broader national identity formation strategies, where language functioned as both a tool of inclusion and exclusion (Mackey, 2005; Thobani, 2007). Ultimately, the PBA institutionalized linguistic proficiency as a central determinant of immigrant desirability, reflecting deeper socio-political priorities in Canadian immigration policy (Ferrer et al., 2014).

### **Immigration Reforms and the Strategic Role of International Students in the 21st Century**

Since its inception, the Points-Based Assessment (PBA) system has been continuously modified to align with federal and provincial economic goals (CIC, 2012). In the 1980s and 1990s, reforms prioritized human capital, increasing points for education and work experience to attract skilled workers suited for a knowledge-based economy (Walsh, 2008). While framed as economic modernization, critics noted these shifts were driven by neoliberal logics of productivity and market efficiency (Corcoran, 1990). Following the 9/11 attacks, immigration selection also incorporated national security concerns, particularly targeting Arabs and Muslims and reinforcing racialized exclusions (Amery, 2013; Knowles, 2016; Kruger, Mulder, & Korenic, 2004).

The 2000s brought further transformation. As Ferrer et al. (2014) note, point allocation and entry programs were restructured to enhance newcomers' economic outcomes and address regional labour shortages, especially in smaller cities impacted by resource-driven growth. These priorities informed the Immigration and Refugee Protection Act (IRPA) of 2002 and the introduction of programs such as the Canadian Experience Class, Provincial Nominee Program, Ministerial Instructions, and pathways to Permanent Residency (PR) for temporary migrants, including those in the Live-in Caregiver Program.

During this period, international students emerged as a strategic immigration stream. As Sharma (2020) argues, they were increasingly viewed as “potential immigrants to produce maximum economic benefits” (p. 76), aligning with IRPA 2002’s economic objectives. This shift coincided with the intensifying marketization of higher education, positioning international students as ideal future immigrants already acculturated, educated in Canada, and fluent in English due to pre-admission testing (Sabzalieva et al., 2022). Their presence in the immigration system exemplifies the commodification of language proficiency, with English test scores acting as a form of pre-screened human capital. This strategy reflects neoliberal values, framing language proficiency as neutral while reinforcing racial, geographic, and class-based hierarchies in defining who counts as a skilled migrant.

### **Standardizing Language Proficiency in the Points-Based System: The Introduction of Formal Tests**

In the early 2000s, the Points-Based Assessment (PBA) system underwent major changes, with greater emphasis placed on applicants’ education and official language proficiency. These reforms were framed as efforts to enhance fairness and consistency in selection and to improve immigrants’ early economic outcomes, such as entry earnings (Picot & Hou, 2016). From a policy standpoint, they also aligned with economic objectives by reducing public spending on language training and shifting responsibility to immigrants themselves (Guo, 2013).

However, these changes disproportionately disadvantaged applicants from non-English or non-French-speaking regions. Candidates from South Asia, Latin America, and parts of Africa often face structural barriers, including inequitable access to English language instruction, which is shaped by postcolonial legacies, underfunded public education systems, and unequal access to private language preparation services (Canagarajah, 1999; Kubota, 2016; Pennycook, 2017;

Piller & Cho, 2013). For instance, Piller and Cho (2013) highlight how costly commercial test preparation services create barriers for marginalized applicants. These tests are embedded in Eurocentric linguistic norms, reinforcing global inequalities in access to immigration opportunities.

While promoted as neutral and meritocratic, standardized assessments privilege applicants from Anglophone and Francophone countries, who often require less investment to meet language benchmarks. As Sharma (2020) argues, this system commodifies linguistic capital, devaluing other forms of expertise and perpetuating global hierarchies that align economic value with dominant language proficiency.

Prior to 2002, language proficiency was typically self-reported and assessed subjectively by immigration officers. The move to standardized tests, introduced under the Immigration and Refugee Protection Act (IRPA), aimed to reduce inconsistency. However, it raised new equity concerns, particularly for immigrants with strong communicative ability but limited access to costly test preparation resources (Von Busekist & Boudou, 2018).

IRPA 2002 granted the Minister of Citizenship and Immigration authority to establish minimum proficiency standards using the Canadian Language Benchmarks (CLB) and Niveaux de compétence linguistique canadiens (NCLC) (IRPA, RSC 2001, c 27, s 74(2)). Applicants could earn up to 24 points for the first official language and four for the second, with scores assessed across four skill areas. The use of benchmarks introduced a more structured and uniform evaluation process, replacing officer discretion with formalized criteria.

However, the implementation raised questions about fairness and accessibility. For instance, the criteria for designating testing agencies, as outlined in documents such as OP 6

(Citizenship and Immigration Canada, 2010), were not fully transparent. Lack of clarity, coupled with concerns about geographic access, cost, and test familiarity, complicated perceptions of fairness in the system.

The 2002 reforms directly influenced how points were allocated. For example, skilled workers could earn four points if their proficiency met the Minister's threshold, five if it exceeded it by one benchmark, and six if it exceeded by two. For the second language, four points were awarded for benchmark level five in each skill area. These point structures reinforced the centrality of language in determining immigration eligibility and integration prospects.

During my archival investigation, I found few records detailing how language thresholds were set or how testing institutions were selected under IRPA 2002. I therefore consulted section 12.5 of OP 6, which states that the Minister's delegate, the Director of the Permanent Resident Policy and Programs Development Division (SSE), was responsible for designating language testing agencies based on criteria such as expertise, reliability, security, and availability (summarized in Table 4, Appendix D). As of 2023, IRCC updates indicate this responsibility has shifted to the Senior Director of Federal Economic Policy and Programs, acting as the Minister's delegate.

Unpacking the full criteria used to select testing agencies, especially for a process with significant consequences for applicants, remains a complex and underexplored area that exceeds the scope of this paper. However, the lack of transparency around these decisions in IRPA 2002 continues to raise important questions about fairness and accountability.

**Post-2008 Recession Reforms: Shifting Immigration Priorities for Economic Recovery**

The 2008 financial crisis and the ensuing “age of austerity” led Canada to reassess its immigration policies and shift towards prioritizing immigrants who could provide immediate economic benefits (Alboim & Cohl, 2012; Barrass & Shields, 2017). In the 2008 federal budget plan titled, “Investing in People,” the government emphasized creating a “most skilled and most flexible workforce” and highlighted the importance of “better managing Canada’s immigration system” to meet this goal (Department of Finance Canada, 2008, p.108).

A pivotal change was the amendment to the *Immigration and Refugee Protection Act* in 2008, granting the Minister of Citizenship and Immigration increased authority to issue instructions on immigration applications without parliamentary oversight. This power led to the introduction of new policies, such as restricting the application of federal skilled workers to those with arranged employment or meeting specific criteria. Another consequential change in 2008 involved the establishment of the Canadian Experience Class (CEC), providing a pathway for international students and highly skilled temporary foreign workers to transition to permanent residences within Canada. The creation of the CEC reflected Canada’s efforts to retain skilled talent and meet labour market demands, particularly in a knowledge-based economy.

International students were typically required to demonstrate their English language proficiency as part of the admission process to Canadian higher education institutions. This was often achieved through standardized English language tests, such as IELTS or TOEFL, where students had to meet minimum score thresholds to qualify for admission. These requirements served as a baseline to ensure that students could effectively participate in academic programs conducted in English. By fulfilling these criteria, international students not only met the institutional standards but also aligned with broader immigration policies that prioritized English

proficiency as a key marker of their ability to integrate into Canadian society (Trilokekar & El Masri, 2019).

### **Heightened Emphasis on Human Capital: Mandatory Language Testing in Immigration Policies Post-2010**

By the 2010s, Canadian immigration policy had further shifted toward prioritizing measurable human capital, reflecting a neoliberal value system in which ideal immigrants are self-sufficient, skilled, and immediately employable (Root et al., 2014). In this context, language proficiency became not only a marker of integration potential but also a gatekeeping mechanism aligned with economic objectives. In 2010, the federal government made formal language testing mandatory for principal applicants in the Federal Skilled Worker Program and Express Entry.

Although the use of language tests was introduced earlier under the Federal Skilled Worker Class, based on Section 79 of the Immigration and Refugee Protection Regulations (IRPR), the tests were not mandatory until 2010, and there was a possibility of a second option for applicants:

(a) have their proficiency in those languages assessed by an organization or institution designated under subsection (3); or (b) provide other evidence in writing of their proficiency in those languages. (IRPR, 2010)

However, Ministerial Instructions published in June 2010 stated that applications under the Federal Skilled Worker Class and Canadian Experience Class would not be processed without formal language test results, contradicting IRPR's provisions. This discrepancy raised concerns within the Citizenship and Immigration Section of the Canadian Bar Association (CBA). In a formal letter to then-Minister Jason Kenney, Vice-Chair Chantal Arsenault argued

the instructions were ultra vires (beyond legal authority) and undermined the rule of law by limiting options for demonstrating language proficiency (Arsenault, 2010).

To resolve this legal tension, the Operational Manual OP 6 was updated in December 2010 to formally incorporate mandatory language testing, aligning practice with Ministerial Instructions. From this point onward, only results from the IELTS (General Training) and CELPIP were accepted for English, and no written evidence was deemed valid.

Section 12.11 of OP 6 clarified that for applications submitted before June 26, 2010, officers could still evaluate written evidence using the CLB 2000 or NCLC 2006. However, after that date, third-party test scores became mandatory. Score equivalency charts in OP 6 (Sections 12.8–12.9) were used to translate IELTS and CELPIP results into point allocations. These tables, presented in Appendices E and F, served as reference tools for assessing applicants across speaking, listening, reading, and writing skills.

Interestingly, the test score requirements and point thresholds differed depending on the date of application. For example, after November 28, 2008, a 0.5-point increase in the listening score was required to earn 4 points. Conversely, the reading section's threshold was reduced. Writing and speaking remained unchanged.

The rationale for these changes was not made explicit in OP 6. However, in the aftermath of the 2008 global recession, immigration reforms increasingly emphasized immediate labour market integration. Tighter language requirements likely reflect an effort to ensure economic self-sufficiency among newcomers, aligning with neoliberal imperatives to minimize state investment in settlement and language support (Guo, 2013; Sharma, 2020).

Stricter language benchmarks, however, produced uneven and racialized outcomes. Standardized language tests, rooted in Eurocentric linguistic norms, tend to privilege applicants from countries where English or French are dominant or institutionally supported often former colonies with strong ties to Western education systems (Piller & Cho, 2013; Kubota, 2016). While many former colonies have large populations of English or French speakers, the quality, accessibility, and recognition of language education vary widely, often reflecting enduring colonial inequalities in educational infrastructure (Kubota, 2016; Piller & Cho, 2013).

This dynamic, as Piller and Cho (2013) highlight, disadvantages applicants from regions where access to high-quality language education, preparation materials, or recognized testing centres may be limited. In turn, language requirements function not only as technical selection criteria but also, according to scholars such as Flores and Rosa (2015), as mechanisms that reinforce racial hierarchies filtering applicants through linguistic proxies for whiteness, Westernness, and class privilege.

Ultimately, the post-2010 reforms hardened the role of language as both an economic asset and a racialized filter. By embedding standardized test results as mandatory, these policies reflected what critical scholars have identified as a vision of the ideal immigrant economically productive and linguistically assimilated into Canada's settler-colonial order (Sharma, 2020; Guo, 2013). Framed as neutral and meritocratic, these changes reconfigured access to immigration in ways that align with neoliberal and colonial logics shifting the burden of integration onto individuals while obscuring the racial and geopolitical inequalities embedded in the language testing regime.

**2012 Reforms: Mandatory Language Testing in Provincial Nominee Programs**

In 2012, then-Minister of Citizenship, Immigration, and Multiculturalism Jason Kenney announced a significant reform to enhance the economic responsiveness of Provincial Nominee Programs (PNPs). Speaking in Saskatchewan on April 11, Kenney (2012, para. 5) cited growing labour shortages across Canada as the impetus for change, describing immigration as “a key tool in addressing the large and growing labour shortages.” These reforms, introduced through the Economic Action Plan 2012, sought to create a faster, more flexible immigration system designed to improve economic outcomes for both newcomers and the Canadian economy. From a critical perspective, this approach exemplifies the commodification of immigrants, framing them primarily as economic assets.

A key change relevant to this study was the introduction of mandatory language testing for PNP applicants, with a minimum requirement of Canadian Language Benchmark (CLB) 4 in English or Niveaux de compétence linguistique canadiens (NCLC) 4 in French. This baseline applied to all four skill areas: listening, speaking, reading, and writing. It targeted most applicants for semi- and low-skilled occupations under the National Occupational Classification (NOC) Skill Levels C and D. Kenney justified this reform by stating:

All of the research done in Canada on immigration indicates that the single most important factor in the success or failure of economic immigrants is their English language proficiency, in Quebec, French of course... They need to understand the language and the technical language of the workplace. (Kenney, 2012, March 1, Speaking notes for The Honourable Jason Kenney, National Metropolis Conference)

This rationale reflects a commonsense neoliberal narrative that shifts responsibility for language acquisition to immigrants, absolving the state of providing language education or training. Such framing overlooks disparities in access to quality language education and preparation resources, particularly for applicants from less privileged regions or socio-economic backgrounds.

The language requirements took effect in July 2012. Kenney downplayed their rigor, describing CLB 4 as “at the low end of the intermediate scale,” and remarking, “They don’t need to have a PhD in English Literature, thankfully” (Kenney, 2012, para. 19). While intended to reassure, this framing trivializes the systemic barriers immigrants may face in meeting even basic benchmarks and reinforces the expectation that linguistic readiness is the individual’s sole responsibility.

According to IRCC descriptions, CLB 4 constitutes “Basic Proficiency.” At this level, individuals can express basic needs, follow simple conversations with effort, read plain instructions, and write short notes or messages. Kenney concluded by asserting that these reforms would promote faster integration and economic success, and he expressed confidence in the evolving role of PNPs in responding to provincial labour needs.

Yet, these reforms reinforce language testing as a gatekeeping mechanism within a broader neoliberal framework embedding linguistic capital into immigration selection in ways that obscure systemic inequities and reframe integration as an individual, rather than structural, responsibility.

### **2013 Policy Update: Increased Emphasis on Language Proficiency in the Federal Skilled Worker Class**

New regulatory amendments to IRPR regulations in the Federal Skilled Worker Class (FSWC) were introduced in August 2012 (coming into force in 2013) which aimed to enhance the Canadian economy and strengthen Canada's standing in the global competition for skilled workers by selecting foreign national workers with high qualifications.

As shown in Table 8 (Appendix G), new amendments were added regarding the language proficiency of applicants in the FSWC. Based on the new changes, applicants were asked to meet the minimum requirement to be qualified for the program; in other words, there now exists a cutting score for those who wanted to apply, which was CLB/NCLC seven, meaning anyone below CLB seven would be ineligible to apply. The other change was the significant increase in the points awarded to one official language from 16 to 24 and the decline in points for the second official language from a maximum of eight to a maximum of four.

### **Express Entry System: Launch, Development, and Impact on International Students**

In 2014, discussions began around implementing a new management system to address immigration backlogs and better align selection with Canada's economic needs. That June, Minister of Citizenship and Immigration Chris Alexander announced the launch of the Express Entry system, which took effect in January 2015. Designed to process applications within six months or less, the system prioritized language proficiency and other human capital factors. As Alexander stated:

... those who arrive with higher levels of education, educational attainment, do better. ...

Those who come earlier in their careers ... flourish over the length of their careers in

Canada. As well, language counts for a lot. Those with a good or excellent level of English or French tend to do better ... (Canada, House of Commons, Standing Committee on Citizenship and Immigration, 2014, p. 8)

Alexander also claimed that Express Entry would support francophone immigration, a goal pursued more directly in later policy updates.

As explained by the Minister, Express Entry requires individuals to submit detailed profiles outlining their skills, education, language proficiency, and work experience, which are then assessed and ranked under the Comprehensive Ranking System (CRS) (Wang, 2018). Unlike the earlier Points-Based Assessment (PBA), the CRS allocates up to 1,200 points across four categories: core human capital (e.g., age, education, language), skill transferability, spouse or partner factors, and additional factors such as provincial nominations or job offers (Gazette, 2014). Candidates compete within the pool, and the highest-ranking applicants are invited to apply for permanent residence, creating a more targeted and competitive selection process (Chand & Tung, 2019). In 2017, the system was further refined to promote francophone immigration by awarding 15 additional points to applicants with high French proficiency, regardless of their English scores (IRCC, 2017). Table 9 (Appendix H) outlines how points are assigned to first and second official languages.

Despite federal narratives framing international students as ideal immigrants, young, Canadian-educated, and proficient in English or French, the Express Entry system has introduced new barriers for them (Dam et al., 2018; Wang, 2018). While intended to streamline immigration, its competitive ranking model often disadvantages recent graduates who, despite strong language skills and Canadian credentials, lack the Canadian work experience or permanent job offers needed to achieve the high Comprehensive Ranking System (CRS) scores

required for permanent residency. As Wang (2018) explains, many international students complete their education in Canada but remain ineligible for Express Entry due to insufficient points, especially when they are unable to secure full-time employment within a limited post-graduation period. As a result, they face prolonged uncertainty, legal limbo, or the risk of status loss (Dam et al., 2018; Wang, 2018). This system effectively devalues Canadian education by treating domestic credentials as insufficient for immigration eligibility unless accompanied by labour market absorption (Wang, 2018), reflecting a broader tension between internationalization and neoliberal immigration policy, where economic productivity outweighs educational investment in determining migrant worth.

### **Challenges of Language Requirements in Express Entry**

In 2018, Ahmed Hussen, the Minister of Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship, highlighted that Canada's immigration priority was addressing economic needs through the Express Entry system and PNP, aiming for 72% of admissions from these systems by 2020-21 (Standing Committee on Immigration and Citizenship, 2018). However, the language proficiency criteria faced criticism for being overly restrictive by Philip Mooney, Vice-President at AURAY Sourcing, a private firm providing immigration and international recruitment services. Mooney argued that temporary foreign workers struggled with high language test requirements, even if they had significant Canadian work experience. He noted that standardized tests such as IELTS and CELPIP often posed barriers, unnecessarily preventing skilled workers from obtaining permanent residency (Standing Committee on Immigration and Citizenship, February 27, 2019).

Mark Lewis of the Carpenters' District Council of Ontario echoed this concern, suggesting a reduction in the language test components for workers on temporary visas. Similarly, MP Randeep Sarai emphasized the disparity in language proficiency expectations

between work permits and permanent residency, suggesting that skilled workers should be assessed based on their effective job performance rather than standardized language test scores (Standing Committee on Immigration and Citizenship, February 28, 2019).

In April 2019, representatives from IELTS, Kim Dienhoff and Victoria Sellar, presented at a committee meeting, defending the credibility of the test but did not address the specific challenges faced by immigrant workers (Standing Committee on Immigration and Citizenship, April 3, 2019). MP Jenny Kwan raised concerns about caregivers struggling with grade 12 equivalency and the combined language skills test. In response, Dienhoff and Sellar mentioned the IELTS Life Skills test as a potential alternative but acknowledged that it had not been implemented for immigration purposes in Canada (Standing Committee on Immigration and Citizenship, April 3, 2019).

Concerns resurfaced in 2020 and 2021, with Jenny Kwan highlighting cases such as a caregiver who failed the language test 26 times, calling for separate testing components to reduce stress. She stated that these caregivers, mostly women, are employed in Canada and have been working and communicating and questioned why they needed to take a language test to apply for their PR (Standing Committee on Immigration and Citizenship, March 10, 2021). Settlement counsellor Vilma Pagaduan and advocate Faye N. Arellano further emphasized the undue stress and financial burden on caregivers, while Syed Hussan of Migrant Workers Alliance for Change highlighted the challenges farm workers face in preparing for language tests due to long working hours and limited access to resources (Standing Committee on Immigration and Citizenship, April 26 & 28, 2021).

The historical evolution of Canada's immigration policies highlights a transition from exclusionary practices rooted in racial and cultural biases to a system that increasingly

commodifies language skills as human capital. While earlier policies reflected explicit racial and cultural discrimination, later reforms, including the introduction of the PBA and mandatory language testing, reframed exclusion through economic criteria, using “race-neutral” measures such as language proficiency to continue privileging certain groups while disadvantaging others (Guo, 2013; Kubota, 2016). Despite these changes, gaps persist, particularly the perpetuation of neoliberal priorities and gendered implications within language requirements.

### **Analysis and Discussion**

This section draws on Foucault’s concept of governmentality and Shohamy’s theorization of language testing to examine how language proficiency requirements have evolved as tools for managing and regulating immigration to Canada. Rather than neutral assessments, language tests function as political technologies shaped by neoliberal rationalities and gendered assumptions about productivity, integration, and belonging. Through an analysis of immigration policy documents, legislative frameworks, and parliamentary records from 1967 to 2023, three central themes emerged: the influence of neoliberal ideologies on immigration selection, the construction of language as a form of human capital, and the gendered exclusions embedded in language testing requirements.

#### **Neoliberal Influences on Immigration Policies**

The introduction of the Points-Based Assessment (PBA) system in 1967 marked a significant neoliberal turn in Canadian immigration policy, reflecting a growing emphasis on individual productivity and measurable human capital. Neoliberal ideologies, which prioritize market-based solutions, economic efficiency, and self-responsibilization, are evident in the PBA’s focus on economic criteria over ethno-racial or national origins. Although presented as a

departure from overtly discriminatory selection practices based on race or religion (Kelley & Trebilcock, 1998), the PBA restructured exclusion by embedding racialized and class-based hierarchies within ostensibly objective economic and linguistic standards (Guo, 2013; Kubota, 2016; Sharma, 2020).

Critics argue that this shift led to the “exclusion of all but the best and the brightest,” reinforcing a narrow vision of desirable immigrants as those with the highest levels of measurable human capital (Barrass & Shields, 2017, p. 203). While this discourse is often framed in neutral or even positive terms, it carries implicit racial, classed, and geopolitical assumptions about who is considered skilled or valuable. It systematically privileges individuals with access to Western education, fluent English or French proficiency, and professional credentials criteria that disproportionately benefit white, middle- and upper-class applicants from the Global North, while marginalizing others whose expertise or labour contributions fall outside this narrow framework (Guo, 2013; Kubota, 2016; Sharma, 2020).

As Holborow (2018) explains, the concept of human capital evaluates individuals based on their perceived economic value to the state or labour market. This logic is encapsulated in the motto “learning equals earning,” which ties self-worth to productivity and positions continuous learning as a pathway to economic utility (p. 523). Within this framework, immigration policy constructs a normative ideal migrant: someone who is highly educated, fluent in one of Canada’s official languages, equipped with transferable work experience, and capable of immediate labour market integration. These expectations reflect a broader neoliberal rationality that emphasizes individual responsibility and economic self-sufficiency. In this context, language proficiency emerges not simply as a communication tool but as a commodified marker of migrant worth, a theme explored further in the following section.

### **Language Skills as Human Capital and Neoliberal Governmentality**

With the introduction of the PBA in 1967, Canada began receiving migrants from a broader range of backgrounds and countries that might not have necessarily been proficient in English or French. By allocating points to language skills in the selection process, a new framework emerged prioritizing the economic value of immigrants, setting the stage for both inclusion and exclusion (Barrass & Shields, 2017). This model posits language learning and improvement as investments with tangible returns (Grin & Vaillancowt, 2012). The consideration of language skills as human capital has been central to neoliberal Canadian immigration policy. As Foucault (2008) notes, this shift from social and state responsibility to self-responsibilization which emphasizes that individuals are solely responsible for language learning.

Brown's (2015) analysis of neoliberalism highlights how immigration policy reflects a broader economic rationality. Neoliberalism reframes political and social life through economic metrics, redefining citizenship and rights in market terms. Under the Canadian PBA, language proficiency is not merely about communication or culture but is treated as an investment within the neoliberal economy. This aligns with Brown's (2015) critique that market logic has penetrated public policy. Framing language as capital shifts responsibility to individuals for national economic outcomes and reinforces migrant inclusion or exclusion based on perceived economic value. This transformation reduces complex social realities to economic terms, commodifying both citizenship and human capital. It sidelines social integration, privileges economic contributions, and perpetuates inequality by valuing only those deemed financially productive.

The examination of shifts in language requirement policies in the initial section of this paper revealed a consistent trend of change and augmentation in both the points and assessment

methods for language requirements in Canadian immigration. In the early stages of the PBA, official testing systems were absent, and points were subjectively assigned by officers conducting interviews, as indicated by records. However, alterations in assessment formats, the introduction of standardized language testing, and the subsequent mandate for language tests in 2010 for the federal working class followed a similar requirement for the provincial nominee class in 2012, all point towards the deployment of technologies of power.

The shift from subjective officer assessments to standardized, mandatory language tests reflect increased regulation, surveillance, and control over immigration eligibility. It underscores the growing emphasis on language as capital within a neoliberal framework, where access to residency is tightly regulated and commodified. Language proficiency has become a formal, measurable criterion, reinforcing standardized tests as gatekeeping tools. This mirrors neoliberalism's focus on quantification and self-regulation, where individuals must demonstrate their value through test scores. As Foucault (2008) argues, such mechanisms exercise power by quantifying human capital and controlling access based on perceived economic worth.

Foucault's (2008) concept of governmentality emphasizes the ways in which governments exercise authority not only through laws and regulations but also through the shaping of subjectivities. The introduction of formal language testing and the subsequent mandatory nature of these tests act as mechanisms through which the government defines and disciplines the ideal immigrant subject. This institutionalization of language proficiency decided by testing agencies as a crucial criterion for immigration subtly influences the kinds of individuals deemed suitable for entry into the country, reinforcing certain norms and standards. As seen in the policy documents and committee records discussed earlier, groups in Canada on temporary work permits, such as caregivers and agricultural workers, face barriers in applying

for permanent residency through Express Entry because of stringent language requirements that do not align with their profiles.

In contrast, international students are often viewed as the ideal immigrant candidates (Scott, et al., 2015) having already adapted to Canadian culture through their education and training. Their Canadian educational qualifications, proficiency in at least one of Canada's official languages, and Canadian academic experience make them more likely to integrate seamlessly into the Canadian job market than other immigrant categories (CIC, 2014), thus, becoming financially more productive more quickly.

Furthermore, the mandatory nature of language testing raises questions about the normalization of particular language skills and levels as a prerequisite for immigration. As Foucault (2008) discussed, this normalization contributes to the establishment of societal norms. Analyzing the implications of such norms within the broader population allows for a deeper understanding of how power operates not only within the immigration system but also in shaping broader discourses around language proficiency and national identity.

Shohamy (2020) argues that language tests are not neutral tools but powerful institutional instruments that shape language policy and immigrant experiences. As both evaluative mechanisms and tools of linguistic governance, these tests construct and legitimize dominant language ideologies. By linking language proficiency to immigration eligibility, they reinforce hierarchies aligned with Foucault's concept of power and norm-setting. This process privileges standard English and French, marginalizes regional dialects and Indigenous languages, and excludes speakers of non-dominant languages, thereby perpetuating systemic inequities and framing linguistic conformity as a condition for inclusion (Lukianenko, 2024; Shohamy, 2020).

### **Gender Inequality**

A review of earlier immigration policies in Canada reveals a gendered conceptualization of the immigrant subject, as reflected in the masculine language embedded in policy documents. Based on *Order in Council P.C. 1967-1616*, the first iteration of the Points-Based Assessment model allocated “five units if he reads, writes and speaks fluently in one of the two languages” (Government of Canada, 1967, p. 168). The full points allocation criteria are summarized in Table 3. Similarly, 1968 House of Commons Committee records note, “It earns credits for him in his assessment, if he has one or the other of the languages...” (House of Commons Committees, 1968, p. 78). These examples show how early immigration discourse positioned men as the primary agents of migration and economic contribution. While overtly gendered language has since disappeared, this shift in representation has not disrupted the deeper structural inequalities embedded in immigration frameworks.

The PBA system, often celebrated as a fair and objective mechanism, is grounded in neoliberal logics that reward quantifiable human capital, such as formal education, wage labour, and standardized language proficiency (Bakker & Gill, 2003; Fraser, 2013). These metrics reflect masculinized norms of productivity and systematically devalue the forms of labour traditionally performed by women, particularly caregiving and domestic work. As McLaren and Dyck (2004) argue, the human capital discourse fails to recognize the gendered conditions under which people migrate, often privileging men’s work histories while rendering women’s contributions invisible. Similarly, Apple (2001) highlights that neoliberalism structures value around market participation, excluding caregiving roles from economic recognition. In doing so, immigration policies do not merely neglect gender, they actively reproduce inequality through their valuation frameworks (Fraser, 2013).

Empirical evidence underscores these systemic patterns. Gu's (2023) analysis of capital accumulation between 1970 and 2020 reveals a persistent gender gap in human capital recognition, with immigrant women disproportionately categorized as dependents and funneled into the family class. Few women enter through the economic class under the PBA model, in part because policy metrics devalue informal and care-based work that many women have performed prior to migration (Abu-Laban, 2024; Arat-Koç, 1999; Boyd, 2006; Tanaka & Cranford, 2024). According to Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada (2024a), the proportion of female principal applicants in economic immigration programs has remained notably low since the launch of the Economic Mobility Pathways Pilot in 2018, reflecting persistent gendered disparities in economic-class admissions. Lue and Ng (2019) further corroborate these dynamics, finding that women from countries with high gender inequality frequently receive lower scores on standardized language tests, restricting their eligibility for economic programs. These women are often funneled into caregiving roles, such as childcare or elder care, which remain structurally undervalued despite their essential contributions (Bakker & Gill, 2003; Butterwick, 2003).

The language proficiency requirements embedded in immigration programs like Express Entry and Provincial Nominee Programs further entrench these gendered exclusions. Tests like IELTS and CELPIP favour structured, formal language in written and spoken tasks, like the four-paragraph essay in IELTS Writing (Gaston, 2022) and coherent abstract vocabulary in CELPIP responses (CELPIP, 2023) which do not capture the relational or situational communication that many immigrant women experience in caregiving or multilingual household contexts. This gap tangibly misaligns with the communicative skills of these individuals, yet it is

crucial in IRCC's point-based evaluations (Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada [IRCC], 2024b).

Many women working as caregivers, primarily from racialized backgrounds, repeatedly fail to meet the language thresholds despite clear functional competence in English (Flagler-George, 2014). Faye N. Arellano, a law clerk and former caregiver advocate, testified before the Standing Committee on Citizenship and Immigration that many caregivers face systemic barriers to permanent residency, including education requirements and language testing thresholds. She highlighted the stress of standardized testing, sharing that "all questions have to be answered under time pressure. At times, my mind just went blank because I was very nervous" (Standing Committee on Citizenship and Immigration, 2021, April 28, p. 2). Arellano called for policy changes to allow caregivers to retake only failed components and to use cumulative scores.

As the data reveals, gendered issues related to language proficiency and immigration policies are critical areas for future research. The intersection of gender, immigration status, and language testing creates systemic barriers that disproportionately affect women, particularly those in caregiving and low-skill roles. Addressing these barriers requires not only a re-evaluation of language testing standards, but also a broader critique of the neoliberal logics embedded in immigration policy, logics that assign value based on market productivity while rendering care, relational labour, and women's contributions structurally invisible (Bakker & Gill, 2003; Fraser, 2013).

### **Conclusion and Recommendations**

This dissertation examined the evolution of language proficiency requirements in Canadian immigration policy from 1967 to 2023, focusing on how language testing has operated as a technology of governance. Drawing on Foucault's concept of governmentality and Shohamy's critical language testing theory, the study traced how language assessment practices, once highly discretionary, became increasingly formalized, standardized, and tied to broader neoliberal imperatives. Through a document analysis of immigration acts, ministerial instructions, operational manuals, and policy debates, I analyzed how language requirements shifted from informal officer-based judgments to high-stakes, point-based criteria rooted in economic logic.

Rather than viewing language tests as neutral tools of integration, this study demonstrated that they function as instruments of regulation measuring, sorting, and disciplining prospective migrants according to narrow, state-defined criteria. Language is framed not as a communicative resource but as a form of human capital: quantifiable, individualized, and tightly aligned with economic productivity. These requirements reflect a broader political rationality that repositions integration as a personal responsibility while masking the structural inequities that shape access to testing, training, and recognition.

Three central findings emerged. First, the rise of standardized tests like IELTS and CELPIP, mandated in 2010 for the Federal Skilled Worker Program and later extended to the Provincial Nominee Programs in 2012 reflects a neoliberal logic that links language proficiency to labour market readiness, shifting responsibility for language acquisition onto applicants themselves. This marked a departure from the earlier era (1967–2001), when language proficiency was assessed through interviews or written evidence, often without standardized

benchmarks. Second, the introduction of point systems and language thresholds, particularly under IRPA 2002, entrenched rigid assessment frameworks that privilege formal registers of English and French. These tests overlook social and relational forms of communication commonly used in caregiving, service, and informal labour sectors in which racialized women are overrepresented. As such, current language policies embed gendered and classed exclusions under the guise of objective merit. Third, the policy architecture, especially since the post-2008 economic reforms and the launch of Express Entry in 2015, has intensified stratification by rewarding test performance with points toward economic immigration, reinforcing hierarchies based on access to language instruction, testing centres, and institutional familiarity.

These findings contribute to several scholarly conversations. Within applied linguistics, this study historicizes the political role of language testing, demonstrating how it functions beyond classroom or academic settings to shape immigration pathways and national identity. In immigration studies, it adds a language-focused perspective to critiques of neoliberal selection frameworks and their gendered and racialized impacts. The research also supports feminist critiques of human capital discourse by illustrating how formal assessments ignore reproductive labour and relational expertise that do not conform to dominant models of economic worth.

The policy implications are significant. To move toward a more equitable immigration system, language requirements must be reimagined. Alternatives include developing context-sensitive, task-based assessments that reflect diverse communicative practices; conducting gender-based analyses and disaggregated equity audits of test outcomes; and linking proficiency scores with access to publicly funded language supports rather than treating them as gatekeeping tools. Immigration policy should recognize that integration is not an outcome of isolated test

performance but a relational, ongoing process shaped by opportunity, inclusion, and systemic support.

Future research could deepen this work by examining how language testing intersects with other axes of inequality, such as race, class, and immigration status, across different migration streams. Comparative studies with other points-based systems may also reveal how global migration governance is shaped by similar language ideologies and neoliberal pressures. Equally important is further historicizing how these systems emerged, not as abrupt reforms, but as outcomes of layered policy shifts, beginning with the 1967 introduction of the Points-Based Assessment model, the codification of language scores under IRPA 2002, and the subsequent reforms in 2010 and 2012 that made standardized tests mandatory. These reforms gradually embedded language proficiency into the machinery of immigration selection, reflecting how state power and market rationality converged to redefine who is eligible to belong.

In conclusion, this study has shown that language testing in Canadian immigration policy is far from neutral. It is a political practice that defines who belongs, who is valuable, and who must be excluded. From early discretionary assessments based on officer perception to formalized point systems and mandatory test scores, language has been used to shape migrant subjectivities in alignment with neoliberal and economic state interests. As long as language remains a proxy for economic potential and cultural conformity, immigration policy will continue to reinforce the very inequities it claims to transcend. Challenging these assumptions is essential not only for more just language policy, but for a more inclusive vision of migration and belonging in Canada.

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## Appendix A

**Table 1***Sources and Types of Primary Documents Retrieved*

Document Source	Website Link	Document Names	Document Type	Document Example
Archived documents on IRCC website	<a href="https://www.canada.ca/en/immigration-refugees-citizenship.html">https://www.canada.ca/en/immigration-refugees-citizenship.html</a>	Operational Bulletins, Policy Manuals	Policy Documents, Archived Updates	Operational Bulletin 2012-003: Language Requirements for Express Entry; Policy Manual: Federal Skilled Worker Class (2010)
House of Commons Committees on Immigration from 3rd Parliament to 34th Parliament (Canadian Parliamentary Historical Resources)	<a href="https://parl.canadiana.ca/">https://parl.canadiana.ca/</a>	Committee Reports, Debates	Historical Parliamentary Records	Report of the Standing Committee on Citizenship and Immigration, 1988; Hansard Debates on Immigration Act, 1976
House of Commons Committees on Immigration from 35th to 44th Parliament (Meetings - House of Commons of Canada)	<a href="https://www.ourcommons.ca/Committees/en/Home">https://www.ourcommons.ca/Committees/en/Home</a>	Committee Meeting Minutes, Witness Testimonies	Parliamentary Records	Jason Kenney on Language Testing Reforms (2010); Committee Minutes on Express Entry System (2014)

Canada Gazette Archive issues related to immigration and language requirements	<a href="https://www.gazette.gc.ca/archives/archives-eng.html">https://www.gazette.gc.ca/archives/ /archives- eng.html</a>	Published Immigration Acts, Regulatory Amendments	Government Publications	Immigration and Refugee Protection Act, 2002 Amendments; Ministerial Instructions for Express Entry (2014)
Order-in- Councils and Immigration Acts (Canadian Museum of Immigration at Pier 21)	<a href="https://pier21.ca/research/immigration-history">https://pier21.ca/r esearch/immigrat ion-history</a>	Orders-in- Council on Immigration, Historical Immigration Acts	Legislative Documents	Order-in-Council 1967-1968: Points-Based Assessment Criteria; Immigration Act, 1910
Order-in- Councils and Immigration Acts (Library and Archives Canada)	<a href="https://parl.canada.ca/browse/show_eng_c_committees_28">https://parl.canadia na.ca/browse?show =eng_c_committee s_28</a>	Archived Orders- in-Council, Historical Government Records	Legislative and Historical Records	Order-in- Council on Language Proficiency (1968); Immigration Act, 1952

## Appendix B

Table 2

*Timeline of Canadian Immigration and Language Policies*

Year	Policy/Change
1600	Early Immigration & Indigenous Displacement
1869	First Immigration Act (1869) - Favouring White Europeans
1885	Chinese Immigration Act (1885) - Head Tax
1902	Immigration Act (1902) - First Explicit Racial Exclusions
1914	Komagata Maru Incident - Exclusion of South Asians
1947	PM Mackenzie King Speech - Racial Composition Policy
1952	Immigration Act (1952) - Racial Selection Criteria
1962	Immigration Act (1962) - Ending Explicit Racial Discrimination
1967	Introduction of Points-Based System (1967) - Language as a Criterion
1969	White Paper on Indigenous Affairs - Indigenous Assimilation
1980	1980s-90s - Focus on Language & Education in Immigration Policy
2001	9/11 - Shift to National Security Concerns
2002	IRPA (2002) - Formalizing Language Assessment
2008	Canadian Experience Class - Linking Immigration to Economy
2010	Mandatory Language Testing - CELPIP & IELTS
2012	Mandatory Language Testing in Provincial Nominee Programs
2013	Increased Language Proficiency in Federal Skilled Worker Class
2014	Standardized Language Tests (2014-Present) - CLB/NCLC Emphasis
2015	Launch of Express Entry System
2017	Express Entry Update: Additional Points for French Proficiency

*Note.* This table provides a chronological overview of key shifts in Canadian immigration policies, highlighting the evolution of language requirements and their role in shaping immigrant selection criteria. Policies marked with specific years indicate significant legislative changes or policy implementations that influenced immigration selection processes.

## Appendix C

**Table 3***Allocation of Units for Language Knowledge in the 1967 Points-Based Assessment*

Factors	Units of Assessment
(g) Knowledge of English and French	(a) Ten units if the applicant reads, writes and speaks fluently both English and French; (b) Five units if he reads, writes, and speaks fluently one of the two languages. (c) Four units for each of the two languages he speaks fluently and reads well. (d) Two units for each of the two languages he speaks fluently (e) One unit for each of the two languages he speaks with difficulty. (f) Two units for each of the two languages he reads well. (g) One unit for each of the two languages he reads with difficulty.

*Note.* Based on Order in Council P.C. 1967-1616, p. 168. Retrieved from [Pier 21 Immigration History](#)

## Appendix D

Table 4

*Criteria for Designation as a Language Testing Organization*

Criteria	Description
Expertise	A test must be appropriate for IRCC purposes by evaluating proficiency in the four skill areas (i.e., reading, writing, oral comprehension/listening, and speaking) in functional English or French at all levels from basic to high proficiency.
Reliability	A test must produce consistently similar scores among candidates with similar language proficiency. The different versions of a test must be at the same level of difficulty each time the test is written.
Integrity/security	A designated testing agency must meet security standards with respect to the logistics of preparing test sites, registering candidates, test writing and marking, sending out results, etc. Sufficient anti-fraud mechanisms must be in place for a test to be approved.
Availability	A designated testing agency for IRCC purposes should be able to make tests available to applicants in all parts of Canada and abroad where there is sufficient demand for third-party language testing.

*Note.* Reproduced from “Criteria for Designation as a Testing Agency,” by Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada, n.d. (<https://www.canada.ca/en/immigration-refugees-citizenship/corporate/publications-manuals/operational-bulletins-manuals/standard-requirements/language-requirements/criteria-designation-testing-agency.html>)

## Appendix E

Table 5

*CELPIP Test score equivalency chart*

Level	Points (per ability)	Test results for each ability			
		Listening	Reading	Writing	Speaking
High (CLB/NCLC 8- 12)	First official language: 4	4H	4H	4H	4H
	Second official language:2	5	5	5	5
Moderate (CLB/NCLC 6- 7)	First and second official language 2	6	6	6	6
		3H	3H	3H	3H
Basic (CLB/NCLC 4- 5)	First and second official language 1 (to a maximum of 2)	4L	4L	4L	4L
		2H	2H	2H	2H
No proficiency (CLB/NCLC 1- 3)	First and second official language 0	3L	3L	3L	3L
		0	0	0	0
		1	1	1	1
		2L	2L	2L	2L

*Note.* Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada (IRCC) Operational Manual, “OP 6 – Federal Skilled Worker Program,” retrieved from

<https://overseastudent.ca/migratetocanada/IMMGuide/CICManual/op/op06-eng.pdf>

## Appendix F

**Table 6**

*IELTS General Training test score equivalency chart (applications received or test reports dated on or after November 28, 2008)*

Level	Points (per ability)	Test results for each ability			
		Listening	Reading	Writing	Speaking
High (CLB/NCLC 8- 12)	First official language: 4 <hr/> Second official language:2	7.5-9.0	6.5-9.0	6.5- 9.0	6.5-9
Moderate (CLB/NCLC 6- 7)	First and second official language  2	5.5-7.0	5.0-6.0	5.5-6.0	5.5-6.0
Basic (CLB/NCLC 4- 5)	First and second official language 1 (to a maximum of 2)	4.5-5.0	3.5-4.5	4.0-5.0	4.0-5.0
No proficiency (CLB/NCLC 1- 3)	First and second official language 0	Less than 4.5	Less than 3.5	Less than 4.0	Less than 4.0

*Note.* Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada (IRCC) Operational Manual, “OP 6 – Federal Skilled Worker Program,” retrieved from <https://overseastudent.ca/migratetocanada/IMMGuide/CICManual/op/op06-eng.pdf>

**Table 7**

*Test score equivalency chart (Applications received and test reports dated before November 28, 2008)*

Level	Points (per ability)	Test results for each ability			
		Listening	Reading	Writing	Speaking
High (CLB/NCLC 8- 12)	First official language: 4 <hr/> Second official language:2	7.0-9.0	7.0-9.0	7.0- 9.0	7.0-9.0
Moderate (CLB/NCLC 6- 7)	First and second official language  2	5.0-6.9	5.0-6.9	5.0-6.9	5.0-6.9
Basic (CLB/NCLC 4- 5)	First and second official language 1 (to a maximum of 2)	4.0-4.9	4.0-4.9	4.0-4.9	4.0-4.9
No proficiency (CLB/NCLC 1- 3)	First and second official language 0	Less than 4.0	Less than 4.0	Less than 4.0	Less than 4.0

*Note.* Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada (IRCC) Operational Manual, “OP 6 – Federal Skilled Worker Program,” retrieved from

<https://overseastudent.ca/migratetocanada/IMMGuide/CICManual/op/op06-eng.pdf>

## Appendix G

Table 8

*2012 and 2013 language requirement for FSWC applicants*

2012 Points System Grid	New Amendments of 2013 to Points System Grid
First Official Language: Maximum 16 points <i>No official language ability required</i>	First Official Language: Maximum 24 points <i>New Mandatory Minimum</i>
Basic Approx. CLB/NCLC 4 or 5	Minimum threshold in all abilities Initially set at CLB/NCLC 7
1 pt per ability to max. of 2	4 pts per ability
	Understands the main points and important details of a conversation and can write routine business correspondence; able to participate in small group discussions and express opinions and reservations about a topic.
Moderate Approx. CLB/NCLC 6 or 7	Threshold + 1 CLB/NCLC level
2 pts per ability	5 pts per ability
	CLB/NCLC 8 <i>Understands technical conversations and reading material in their line of work; asks questions, analyzes and compares information in order to make decisions.</i>
High CLB/NCLC 8 +	Threshold + 2 or more CLB/NCLC levels
4 pts per ability	6 pts per ability
	CLB/NCLC 9 Participates in business meetings and debates; understands a broad range of general and abstract topics; writes formal and informal notes and summary documents.
Second Official Language: Maximum 8 points	Second Official Language: Maximum 4 points CLB/NCLC 5 in all abilities

*Note.* Derived from Canada Gazette, “Regulations Amending the Immigration and Refugee Protection Regulations,” retrieved from <https://gazette.gc.ca/rp-pr/p1/2012/2012-08-18/html/reg2-eng.html>

## Appendix H

Table 9

*Comprehensive Ranking System 2015, language proficiency points allocation*

Canadian Benchmark level (CLB)	First Official Language Points (No Spouse)	First Official Language Points (With Spouse)	Second Official Language Points (No Spouse)	Second Official Language Points (With Spouse)
Less than 4	0	0	0	0
4 or 5	6	6	1	1
6	9	8	3	3
7	17	16	3	3
8	23	22	6	6
9	31	29	6	6
10 or higher	34	32	6	6
Maximum Points for Each Language Skill Area:				
Proficiency in All Language Skill Areas	First Official Language Points (No Spouse)	First Official Language Points (With Spouse)	Second Official Language Points (No Spouse)	Second Official Language Points (With Spouse)
	136	128	24	22

*Note.* Retrieved from Canada Gazette, “Ministerial Instructions Respecting the Express Entry System,” retrieved from <https://www.gazette.gc.ca/rp-pr/p1/2014/2014-12-01-x10/html/extra10-eng.html>

**Appendix I**

**List of Abbreviations**

Canadian Bar Association (CBA)

Canadian English Language Proficiency Index Program (CELPIP)

Canadian Language Benchmark (CLB)

Comprehensive Ranking System (CRS)

Economic Mobility Pathways Pilot (EMPP)

Federal Skilled Worker Class (FSWC)

Immigration and Refugee Protection Act (IRPA)

Immigration and Refugee Protection Regulations (IRPR)

Immigration, Refugees, and Citizenship Canada (IRCC)

International English Language Testing System (IELTS)

Library and Archives Canada (LAC)

National Occupational Classification (NOC)

Niveaux de compétence linguistique canadiens (NCLC)

One Skill Retake (OSR)

Permanent Residency (PR)

Points-Based Assessment (PBA)

Provincial Nominee Program (PNP)

### **Chapter 3 Standardizing Access: The Neoliberal Restructuring of Language Proficiency Policy and Practice at the University of Manitoba**

Canada has emerged as a leading global destination for international students, driven by its stable political climate, immigration pathways, and strategic education policies (McCartney, 2021; Sá & Sabzalieva, 2018). Between 2010 and 2018, international student enrollment increased by 165% (Canadian Bureau for International Education, 2018), reflecting the growing global demand for international education, which is projected to exceed 7.2 million mobile students by 2025 (James-MacEachern & Yun, 2017). Federal and provincial governments have positioned international education as a mechanism for both global engagement and skilled migration, promoting policies that link study and immigration pathways while casting international students as ideal future citizens with Canadian credentials and language proficiency (Scott et al., 2015; Trilokekar & El Masri, 2017).

In response, universities like the University of Manitoba have expanded recruitment, often aiming for international students to comprise 20% of enrollment (McKeown et al., 2020). This growth has become a financial strategy amid public funding cuts, with institutions increasingly reliant on international tuition (Buckner et al., 2023; Stein, 2018; Usher, 2020). In provinces like Ontario and BC, international education now ranks among top export sectors (Patel, 2022). These shifts reflect a neoliberal restructuring of higher education, where internationalization serves both symbolic and financial aims (Brunner, 2022).

Yet this growth has not come without trade-offs. As international student enrollment rises, institutions have standardized and restructured admissions frameworks to manage this demand. These changes are often framed as efforts to ensure academic readiness, but are shaped by neoliberal logics of efficiency, accountability, and institutional selectivity (Brown, 2015; Olssen

& Peters, 2005). Standardized language testing has become a central mechanism for regulating access, functioning both as a proxy for academic preparedness and as a gatekeeping tool shaped by institutional and national priorities (Hamid, Hoang, & Kirkpatrick, 2019; Raaper, 2017; Shohamy, 2020).

Exams such as the International English Language Testing System (IELTS) and the Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL) are widely accepted indicators of English proficiency; however, critical scholarship argues that they do more than merely measure language skills (Eckes & Althaus, 2020). These tests increasingly function as mechanisms of institutional governance, emphasizing quantifiable metrics and privileging Western academic norms (Mintz, 2021; Morgan, 2022). Applicants with the financial and cultural capital to navigate these assessments are advantaged, while students from non-Anglophone and Global South contexts face disproportionate structural barriers (Piller & Bodis, 2024; Shohamy, 2020). Despite the growth in international enrollment, access remains stratified by linguistic, economic, and racialized hierarchies.

This study traces the University of Manitoba's shift from informal language assessments to externally mandated, high-stakes testing. These changes exemplify global trends in the commodification of language as human capital (Shohamy, 2022). Increasingly, standardized tests are tied to immigration goals, positioning international students as economic contributors and prospective citizens (Tamtik et al., 2020). As a U15 research university, the University of Manitoba provides a critical case to explore how national and global pressures shape local policy practices.

Guided by theories of neoliberalism, internationalization, and Foucault's governmentality, this study uses hybrid thematic analysis (Fereday & Muir-Cochrane, 2006) to

ask: How have language testing requirements at the University of Manitoba evolved from 1959 to 2023? And what institutional, economic, and policy forces have driven these changes?

Drawing on archival data from the University of Manitoba's academic calendars (1959–2023), I demonstrate how language proficiency has been transformed from a flexible academic expectation into a commodified and privatized prerequisite for access to higher education. This evolution, I argue, reflects the entrenchment of neoliberal governance in Canadian higher education, where language testing policies increasingly function as instruments of institutional governance, financial rationalization, and structured access.

### **Theoretical Framework**

This analysis applies Foucault's concept of governmentality to examine standardized language testing policies at the University of Manitoba. Governmentality refers to how institutions govern individuals through regulatory practices like standardized assessments (Foucault, 1991). Neoliberalism operates within this framework as the dominant economic logic, advancing market-driven strategies that prioritize competition, efficiency, and commodification. As Brown (2015) notes, neoliberalism reframes students as human capital and shifts universities toward financialized governance. Internationalization reinforces these logics by positioning universities in the global education market and employing standardized language testing as a tool for institutional and economic advantage (Shohamy, 2020). These frameworks together reveal how language testing has become a mechanism of institutional governance shaped by broader political and economic forces.

**Governmentality as an Overarching Framework**

Foucault's (1991) concept of governmentality refers to the ways in which institutions (e.g., universities, schools, families) regulate populations through mechanisms of control, shaping an individual's behaviour to align with broader systems of power. Within higher education, universities function as governing institutions that define problems and regulate populations by regulating access through policies such as standardized language test requirements. These policies are not neutral evaluations but governance tools that embed power structures and shape who can access higher education (Shohamy, 2020). Standardized language testing policies extend beyond linguistic evaluation, operating as regulatory technologies (i.e., determining who will and will not have access) that structure student populations in alignment with institutional priorities (Raaper, 2016).

Viewed through this lens, language testing enforces conformity to externally imposed linguistic norms. These policies reinforce institutional power by implementing quantifiable measures that standardize, monitor, and control access to higher education. International applicants become objects of management by universities through language testing tools. These policies also shape how applicants perceive the requirements for academic legitimacy and participation. This governance model encourages self-regulation, as students must take personal responsibility for achieving language proficiency benchmarks, often through costly and time-consuming standardized tests, before they are granted access to higher education (Brunner, 2022).

### **Neoliberalism as the Economic Logic of Governmentality**

Neoliberal ideology, operating within governmentality, leads to institutional policies that adhere to market principles such as efficiency, accountability, and competition (Brown, 2015). In higher education, neoliberal reforms have transformed universities into market-driven entities that prioritize revenue generation, performance metrics, and operational efficiency (Savage, 2017). Under this model, education becomes a commodity, and standardized tests function as both an investment in and a measure of human capital (Olssen & Peters, 2005).

Standardized language tests such as IELTS and TOEFL function as products of neoliberal rationality, shifting the financial burden of assessment from institutions to students while also generating revenue for corporate test providers (Shohamy, 2022). These tests reinforce a system in which language proficiency is treated as an economic commodity, compelling students to invest in costly preparation, pay test fees, and often pay for repeated test attempts in order to secure admission (Piller & Bodis, 2024). The outsourcing of assessment to for-profit entities reinforces this shift, often framed through discourses of fairness and efficiency.

Neoliberal reforms have intensified reliance on standardized testing as a tool of institutional regulation. Embedding language tests into admissions reflects a preference for quantifiable measures aligned with market values of efficiency and accountability (Gardiner-Milln, 2021). This emphasis contrasts with holistic approaches that value multilingualism, diverse experiences, and broader indicators of academic readiness (Shohamy, 2020). Yet under neoliberal governance, such considerations are increasingly sidelined in favor of metrics that reinforce strategic goals, such as improving global rankings, attracting international students, and enhancing institutional accountability to stakeholders (Hazelkorn, 2011; Marginson, 2006).

### **Internationalization as a Neoliberal Strategy**

Internationalization, often portrayed as a commitment to global engagement and diversity, operates under neoliberal governance as a strategy for economic expansion and institutional competition (Knight, 2014). Stein (2018) argues that Canadian universities increasingly prioritize revenue and global branding over inclusive engagement, focusing on full-fee-paying international students. Because international students are not subsidized by provincial funding, they are charged tuition rates that often exceed those paid by domestic students. This emphasis often overshadows efforts to improve access for students from underrepresented or economically disadvantaged regions, reinforcing structural inequities in international education.

Universities employ internationalization as a strategy to attract tuition-paying international students (in order to compensate for funding shortfalls), enhance global rankings (in order to attract more students and funding), and expand market reach (Guo & Guo, 2017). Standardized language testing plays a central role in this strategy, acting as a regulatory filter and reinforcing English as the dominant academic language (Jenkins, 2018).

While critiques of linguistic dominance are vital, it is also important to recognize that proficiency in the language of instruction supports international students' academic engagement and ability to meet course expectations (Jabeen, Wang, & Cheng, 2019). Standardized assessments like IELTS, TOEFL, and PTE operationalize this requirement, serving as gatekeeping tools to ensure minimum language thresholds. These tests also help contain costs by admitting students less likely to need language support, thereby reducing institutional expenditures (Piller & Bodis, 2024; Shohamy, 2020). However, rather than broadening access or valuing multilingual competencies, reliance on standardized testing reinforces English as the dominant academic norm (Pennycook, 2021).

Although framed as objective measures of academic readiness, these policies often overlook the systemic disadvantages faced by students from non-Anglophone and linguistically diverse backgrounds, shaped by colonial legacies (Shohamy, 2022). The expansion of standardized testing enhances institutional efficiency, selectivity, and revenue through international enrollment. However, it also raises concerns about accessibility and fairness, particularly for underprivileged students who face financial and systemic barriers, reinforcing global educational inequalities (Bozheva, 2020).

Critics argue that internationalization perpetuates systemic inequalities by privileging native-speaker norms and reinforcing linguistic hierarchies that marginalize multilingualism and diverse identities (Shohamy, 2022; Tavares, 2024; Zeng et al., 2023). Standardized tests function as gatekeeping tools that entrench socio-economic and racialized exclusions, disadvantaging students from non-Anglophone backgrounds who face financial and logistical barriers to meeting rigid criteria (Piller & Bodis, 2024). Additionally, policies like the two-year test validity impose recurring costs, commodifying language proficiency rather than recognizing it as dynamic and evolving (Hamid et al., 2019).

The University of Manitoba's evolving language testing policies illustrate how governmentality, neoliberalism, and internationalization intersect to shape institutional governance. Standardized assessments serve not only to measure proficiency but also as regulatory tools aligned with market-driven imperatives, reinforcing selectivity and financial priorities. These policies reflect broader global trends in higher education, where standardized testing is increasingly embedded in neoliberal structures. Understanding these theoretical frameworks enables a critical examination of the evolution, motivations, and inequities associated with language testing for international students.

### **Literature Review**

Although there is growing critical scholarship on the neoliberal restructuring of higher education and the corporatization of admissions practices, relatively little attention has been paid to the specific evolution of language testing policies within individual institutions. In the Canadian context, standardized English proficiency tests such as IELTS and TOEFL are now widely used to regulate international student access, yet the institutional processes behind their adoption and expansion remain under-examined. This review explores the political and economic forces shaping these policies, with particular attention to how neoliberal reforms, internationalization strategies, and corporate testing actors have influenced language policy in Canadian universities, setting the stage for this case study of the University of Manitoba.

### **Neoliberal Restructuring of Admissions and Language Testing**

Neoliberalism has fundamentally reshaped the structure and priorities of higher education, transforming universities from public institutions into market-driven entities that prioritize revenue generation, efficiency, and accountability (Brown, 2015; Olssen & Peters, 2005). Under these conditions, admissions practices have become key sites of institutional governance, where access is regulated through quantifiable metrics designed to align with economic logics rather than educational equity (Raaper, 2017; Rogers, 2018).

Standardized language testing exemplifies this shift. Once considered a support mechanism for academic success, English proficiency is now treated as a measurable commodity, external to the institution and acquired through private means. Tests like IELTS and TOEFL function as technologies of neoliberal governance (Shohamy, 2020), externalizing the assessment of language readiness to for-profit providers and shifting financial and logistical

burdens onto students. These tools not only evaluate applicants but also regulate and discipline access to higher education, aligning with broader institutional goals of efficiency and selectivity.

In the Canadian context, the neoliberal restructuring of university funding has intensified institutional reliance on international tuition, particularly following significant federal cutbacks in the 1990s and continued provincial austerity in the 2000s and 2010s (McCartney, 2021; Gibson, 2020). This withdrawal of public funding led universities to adopt entrepreneurial strategies such as international student recruitment, fee deregulation, and the commodification of admissions processes (Brunner, 2017; Johnstone, 2011). Brown (2015) argues that these changes represent more than budgetary adjustments, they mark a redefinition of education as a private investment. Provincial moves, such as British Columbia's decision to treat international students as self-funding consumers, entrenched this logic (Brunner, 2017).

Between 2013/14 and 2018/19, government contributions to Canadian universities fell from 38.6% to 35.4% of total revenue, while tuition revenue increased from 24.7% to 29.4%. A significant portion of this growth came from international students, whose enrolment nearly doubled from 88,014 in 2008/09 to 196,563 in 2017/18, representing 14.7% of all students by 2018/19. Paying an average of \$32,041 annually, compared to \$6,610 for domestic students, these students contributed nearly \$4 billion in tuition revenue, over one-third of the national total in 2018/19 (Statistics Canada, 2020a, 2020b, 2020c). While domestic tuition is largely regulated by provincial governments, international tuition is often unregulated, enabling steep increases that deepen inequities.

At the University of Manitoba, these dynamics became particularly visible following a 5% cut to provincial operating grants in 2020, equivalent to \$17.3 million, which resulted in hiring freezes, layoffs, and heightened pressures to identify alternative revenue sources (Gibson,

2020). Similar budget constraints were seen in earlier years, including the 1993 and 2014 austerity measures that reshaped institutional priorities (Cole, 1993; Cabel, 2014). In this context, international students emerged as key financial assets, and language proficiency requirements became a central regulatory tool. By outsourcing assessment to corporate providers like ETS, IELTS, and Pearson, UM reduced internal evaluation costs while reinforcing a standardized framework for admission (Shohamy, 2020; Piller & Bodis, 2024).

These dynamics disproportionately disadvantage students from the Global South and non-Anglophone backgrounds, who face systemic barriers in meeting rigid language benchmarks (Hamid et al., 2019). Wealthier students are able to access private tutoring, repeat tests, and purchase preparation resources, while others are filtered out by a system that conflates language scores with academic potential (Gardiner-Milln, 2021; Sabbaghan & Fazel, 2023). As neoliberal governance elevates numerical performance over contextual understanding, language tests become less about readiness and more about reinforcing stratified access to higher education.

By embedding standardized tests into admission policies, universities institutionalize a market-oriented model of access that privileges commodified credentials and linguistic conformity. Language testing, in this context, becomes not merely an academic requirement, but a regulatory mechanism of exclusion, serving institutional interests while reproducing global hierarchies of race, class, and language.

### **Internationalization and the Marketization of Language Proficiency**

Internationalization is frequently framed as a commitment to global citizenship and academic collaboration, but in practice, it often operates as a neoliberal strategy for institutional revenue generation and global market positioning (Knight, 2014; Stein, 2018). As public funding

declined, Canadian universities increasingly relied on international students to offset budget shortfalls, adopting recruitment targets and performance metrics tied to international enrolment growth (Buckner et al., 2023; Patel, 2022). Full-fee-paying international students became not only contributors to campus diversity, but also central to institutional financial planning and long-term sustainability (Trilokekar & El Masri, 2017; Usher, 2020).

This market-driven orientation reshaped how institutions regulated access, with standardized language testing emerging as a core mechanism of selectivity. Tests like IELTS, TOEFL, and PTE are used not only to assess academic readiness, but also to manage who can enter and succeed within an internationalized system defined by English-language dominance. These assessments function as gatekeeping tools that align with institutional priorities: they filter applicants with fewer language support needs, reduce the demand for internal resources, and legitimize admission decisions through ostensibly objective metrics (Piller & Bodis, 2024; Shohamy, 2020).

At the University of Manitoba, these dynamics are evident in policy shifts that accompanied rising international enrolments, from 9.6% of the student population in 2011 to 22.7% by 2023 (Office of Institutional Analysis, 2011, 2023). During this period, UM broadened its list of accepted standardized language tests (e.g., TOEFL, IELTS, PTE), introduced expiry policies that required recent scores, and emphasized compliance through typographic markers in official documents. These changes coincided with increased international recruitment and growing reliance on international tuition revenue. While framed as efforts to uphold academic standards, such policies also reflect a financial calculus that privileges students who can pay and perform according to globalized, commodified norms of English proficiency (Shohamy, 2022; Stein, 2018).

Critical scholars argue that this model of internationalization reinforces rather than disrupts global educational inequalities. Access is mediated by language proficiency requirements that favour applicants from Anglophone or elite urban backgrounds with access to test preparation services and multiple test attempts (Piller & Bodis, 2024; Zeng et al., 2023). As such, internationalization and language policy work in tandem to construct a selectively inclusive academic environment, one that presents itself as globally engaged while sustaining linguistic, racialized, and economic hierarchies (Ahmed, 2012; Shohamy, 2022; Vander Tavares, 2024).

### **Corporate Testing Providers and the Privatization of Assessment**

The growing reliance on standardized language testing in higher education reflects the deepening corporatization of university governance. As institutions face budget constraints and pressures for efficiency, they increasingly partner with private companies to manage core functions, including admissions (Raaper, 2017; Shohamy, 2020). Corporations such as Educational Testing Service (ETS), the British Council, IDP Education, and Pearson dominate the global market for English language testing, generating billions annually through tests like TOEFL, IELTS, and PTE (Pearson, 2019; Templer, 2004). These organizations function not just as service providers but as policy influencers: through targeted lobbying, strategic partnerships, and brand positioning, they have embedded their products into official immigration and admissions systems in Canada and globally (Hogan-Brun et al., 2009; Pearson, 2019; Shohamy, 2009).

At the University of Manitoba, the outsourcing of language assessment to these corporate actors allowed the institution to align with international standards while minimizing internal costs for test development, scoring, or language support services. Testing policies such as restricting test score validity to two years or limiting accepted formats directly benefit testing

providers, who profit from repeat test-takers and demand for high-priced preparation materials (Deygers, 2017; Sabbaghan & Fazel, 2023). These practices commodify language proficiency, transforming it into a purchasable credential with an expiration date, regardless of actual linguistic ability.

This model embeds structural inequality into the admissions process. Applicants from the Global South or non-Anglophone countries must often invest heavily in preparation courses, test fees, and travel, while navigating requirements designed around white, Western norms of academic English (Hamid et al., 2019; Piller & Bodis, 2024; Shohamy, 2009). Students from wealthier backgrounds can afford elite preparation resources and multiple test attempts, while others face financial exclusion (McKeon, 2022; Ngo, 2024). English proficiency is defined through narrow standards that marginalize multilingual, hybrid, or non-Western Englishes, reinforcing linguistic and economic hierarchies in higher education (Sabbaghan & Fazel, 2023; Shohamy, 2020).

Beyond financial constraints, scholars have emphasized the emotional and psychological toll of standardized testing. Autobiographical accounts by former IELTS test-takers describe the anxiety, discouragement, and sense of inadequacy experienced while navigating high-stakes language gatekeeping (Mirhosseini et al., 2025). These emotional burdens are rarely acknowledged in institutional policy, but they reveal the human cost of a system built on exclusion.

Linguistically, standardized tests erase diverse Englishes in favour of native-like fluency grounded in Anglophone norms. As Lachini (2025) and Mirhosseini et al. (2025) argue, such tests constrain pedagogy and erase global Englishes, enforcing a singular version of correctness. Ndlangamandla (2024) further asserts that these practices reproduce colonial legacies by

positioning Western English norms as universal, thereby sustaining Eurocentric gatekeeping structures under the guise of neutrality and academic preparedness.

Scholars also question the pedagogical rationale for certain testing policies. For instance, Deygers (2017) and Tracy-Ventura et al. (2024) both found little evidence that language proficiency declines meaningfully within two years, undermining the legitimacy of short score validity periods. Yet such policies persist, not necessarily for educational reasons, but to sustain corporate revenue through enforced test repetition.

The shift to online testing during the COVID-19 pandemic, such as the adoption of the Duolingo English Test, was initially seen as a move toward flexibility and accessibility. However, studies show that these changes often reproduced existing inequalities, with disparities in internet access, quiet space, and digital familiarity becoming new forms of exclusion (Isbell & Kremmel, 2020). These developments exemplify what Rogers (2018) calls neoliberal governance through crisis: institutions intensified surveillance and accountability during economic uncertainty, using online testing to maintain control while continuing to outsource responsibility.

Ultimately, standardized language tests function not only as tools for measuring academic ability, but as mechanisms of institutional governance. Universities use them to regulate who is admitted, who is excluded, and under what conditions, while deflecting ethical scrutiny onto third-party providers. This arrangement allows institutions to uphold a façade of objectivity and rigour, even as they participate in a deeply commercialized and inequitable system of access (Deuel, 2022; Raaper, 2017). By situating these dynamics within broader patterns of neoliberal reform, we can understand language testing not as a neutral process, but as a powerful instrument of exclusion, control, and corporate entrenchment in higher education.

While many scholars have critiqued the neoliberal dimensions of language testing and its role in higher education, few studies have examined how these dynamics unfold within the policies of a single institution over time. This study addresses that gap by tracing the evolution of language proficiency policies at the University of Manitoba (1959–2023), revealing how standardized testing has been deployed as a tool of governance amid changing economic, political, and institutional pressures.

### **Methodology**

In this study, I employed a hybrid thematic analysis to examine how standardized language test requirements at the University of Manitoba (UM) have changed from 1959 to 2023. This approach blends deductive and inductive coding (Fereday & Muir-Cochrane, 2006), allowing both theory-driven categories and unexpected patterns to emerge from the data. Deductive coding was guided by critical frameworks, neoliberalism, governmentality, and internationalization, while inductive coding allowed themes to surface directly from the text. This dual strategy ensured analytical rigor while remaining open to nuance.

### **Data Sources**

The analysis examines language proficiency requirements for admission as documented in the University of Manitoba's academic calendars from 1959 to 2023. This timeframe was selected because 1959 marks the first instance where the university introduced language assessment requirements in its admissions policies. The end point, 2023, represents the most recent data available at the time of collection.

Academic calendars, which are annual publications issued by universities, contain essential information such as academic regulations, programs, and admission requirements.

These calendars were selected as data sources because they provide a comprehensive and continuous record of language proficiency requirements, enabling a detailed thematic analysis of their evolution over time. A total of 64 calendars from 1959–1960 to 2022–2023 were accessed through the University of Manitoba’s Elizabeth Dafoe Library and online archives, enabling a detailed thematic analysis of the evolution of language requirements over time.

### **Data Analysis Procedure**

The data analysis followed a systematic process to examine the historical evolution of standardized language testing requirements at the University of Manitoba, linking this process back to the critical frameworks of neoliberalism, governmentality, and internationalization to reinforce consistency. Using a hybrid thematic analysis approach, the study employed four key steps: initial reading and coding, identification of patterns and themes, thematic development, and contextual interpretation. This structured approach ensured a comprehensive exploration of both anticipated and emergent trends within the data.

### ***Initial Reading and Coding***

The University of Manitoba academic calendars were systematically reviewed to identify key shifts in standardized language testing policies over time. The analysis focused on the admissions sections, where English language requirements were outlined. Using a deductive coding approach, guided by theoretical frameworks including neoliberalism, governmentality, and internationalization, I identified key terms and phrases that reflected predefined categories such as “Commodification of Language” and “Standardization as a Gatekeeping Tool.”

For instance, phrases such as “Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL)” (introduced in 1974–1975) and “evidence acceptable to the University of Manitoba of

proficiency in English” (1970–1971) were coded as examples of commodification, reflecting the institutionalization of English proficiency as a prerequisite for access. Similarly, statements like “Failure in one or the other of these examinations will mean rejection” (1963–1964) and “must write the Test of English as a Foreign Language” (1978–1979) were identified as expressions of gatekeeping, where standardized testing became a mechanism for regulating access to higher education.

When terms did not align with predefined categories, I analyzed them for emergent themes, refining my coding framework to better understand how language policies shape international student admissions. For example, crisis adaptation emerged during COVID-19, as reflected in the March 18, 2020 approval of Duolingo for Fall 2020 and Winter 2021 admissions (University of Manitoba, 2019–2020). Likewise, increasing rigidity surfaced through policies like score expiration: “scores more than two (2) years are invalid” (University of Manitoba, 2018–2019, p. 81). This dual coding strategy ensured theoretical alignment while remaining responsive to unexpected policy shifts, enabling deeper thematic analysis.

### *Identification of Patterns and Themes*

Building on the initial coding phase, I conducted additional close readings to refine and deepen the patterns that had emerged. While early coding highlighted recurring policy shifts, this stage focused on organizing those patterns into coherent groupings for theoretical interpretation. Through this iterative process, significant shifts emerged, such as the transition from informal assessments to formalized standardized testing (e.g., the use of TOEFL and IELTS). These patterns were analyzed in relation to theoretical frameworks, illustrating how institutional priorities and standardized language testing policies were adapted in response to broader societal and global trends.

*Thematic Development*

The refined codes were synthesized into broader themes that capture the underlying logics driving the evolution of language testing policies at the University of Manitoba. These thematic categories are Commodification of Language, Standardization and Exclusion, and Market Responsiveness. Commodification of Language refers to the transformation of English language proficiency into a marketable asset, where access to higher education is contingent on students' financial ability to purchase standardized credentials such as TOEFL, IELTS, or PTE scores. Standardization and Exclusion captures how rigid language testing benchmarks have standardized notions of academic readiness around narrow, Anglophone norms, disproportionately excluding students from diverse linguistic and socio-economic backgrounds. Market Responsiveness highlights how admissions criteria have been adapted in response to external pressures, such as international recruitment targets and institutional budgetary needs, rather than purely pedagogical goals.

Themes were derived using the hybrid coding strategy outlined earlier. Deductive codes drew from key concepts such as neoliberal restructuring, governmentality, and internationalization, while inductive insights emerged through close analysis of university calendars. This revealed shifts in tone and policy framing, including temporary flexibility during COVID-19, such as the acceptance of the Duolingo English Test in 2020–2021, justified by urgency rather than pedagogical validation. In contrast, recent calendars show increased rigidity, with fixed expiration windows on test scores (e.g., “scores more than two (2) years are invalid”), reflecting stricter admissions governance.

### *Contextual Interpretation*

The final step involved interpreting the thematic findings within the context of broader institutional and societal shifts, explicitly connecting these shifts to the theoretical frameworks of neoliberalism, governmentality, and internationalization. This interpretation highlighted how standardized language testing policies were shaped by market-driven imperatives and global competitiveness, reflecting neoliberal and internationalization frameworks. Table 1 (see Appendix A) provides a summary of major policy shifts and their theoretical interpretations. The use of deductive and inductive coding ensured methodological consistency and enabled readers to understand how language testing reforms at UM reflect broader global and national governance logics.

### **Limitation**

While this methodology offers a structured and comprehensive analysis, certain limitations should be acknowledged. Most notably, the study relies exclusively on publicly available archival documents (academic calendars), which do not reveal internal deliberations or decision-making processes. Future research could complement this analysis with interviews or internal documents to provide deeper insight into the motivations behind policy reforms.

### **Analysis of Language Testing Requirements at the University of Manitoba**

This section examines the historical evolution of standardized language testing requirements at the University of Manitoba, tracing key shifts from informal assessments to the adoption of standardized tests such as TOEFL and IELTS. By analyzing changes in policy wording, implementation, and exemption criteria, it highlights how language proficiency

requirements have become increasingly structured and reflective of broader institutional and global trends.

Over the past several decades, international enrollment at the University of Manitoba has steadily expanded. According to annual enrollment reports of international students by citizenship distribution, published by the Office of Institutional Analysis (2011, 2023), international students comprised 9.6% of the total student population in 2011, rising to 22.7% by 2023 and representing more than 120 countries. A summary of international student enrollment trends from 2011 to 2023 is provided in Appendix B, Table 2.

### **Absence of Standardized Language Testing Before 1959**

Before 1959, the University of Manitoba had no formal language testing requirements for international students. Institutional regulation was minimal, likely reflecting the small number of non-English-speaking international students at the time. According to Cameron (2006), international student enrollment in Canada grew gradually, from 6,000 in 1950 to nearly 59,000 by 2001. As McCartney (2021) suggests, a likely concentration of students from English-speaking regions may have further reduced the perceived necessity for standardized language policies during that period.

This trend at the university level mirrored Canada's post-WWII immigration policies, which aimed to boost population growth and economic recovery by prioritizing immigrants from English-speaking and European countries (Knowles, 2016). Since English proficiency was often presumed among these groups, there was little immediate need or pressure to implement formalized language testing in higher education. However, as the international student population gradually increased and diversified to include more students from non-English-speaking

backgrounds, the perceived necessity for language testing became more apparent, setting the stage for the introduction of formal requirements in 1959.

### **Informal English Testing Introduced (1959-1960)**

In 1959–1960, the University of Manitoba introduced an “Informal English Test for Overseas Students,” its first recorded attempt to assess non-native English speakers. The calendar stated that students “whose mother tongue is a language other than English” were required to take the test on September 14, 1959 (University of Manitoba, 1959–1960, p. 45), indicating it was mandatory. However, the test did not determine admission. Instead, results influenced students’ academic programs: “upon the results will depend, in part, the program of studies to be assigned to them” (p. 45), suggesting the test was used for placement rather than as a strict gatekeeping tool.

The designation of the test as “informal” suggests a lack of standardization, as no external benchmarks or structured testing procedures were mentioned in the calendar. Furthermore, the document does not specify whether the test was oral, written, or a combination of both, leaving the format unclear. Since the assessment was conducted on-site by university faculty, it is likely that evaluations were subjective, varying depending on the instructor. While this test introduced language regulation in international student admissions, it lacked the formalized structure that would later define standardized proficiency assessments like TOEFL and IELTS.

This shift coincided with Canada’s growing openness to immigration from non-traditional source countries, influenced by labour shortages and economic expansion (Satzewich, 2015). The introduction of informal testing marked an early attempt to assess English proficiency among international students without establishing rigid admission barriers. While the calendar

does not specify institutional motivations, this initial step set a precedent for the development of more formalized testing requirements as the university's international student population expanded.

### **Shift to Standardized Testing (1961-1966)**

In 1961, the University of Manitoba introduced formal standardized language tests as part of its English proficiency requirements, marking a shift toward more structured regulation. According to the university calendar, overseas students “may be required” to take either the English Proficiency Tests prepared by the English Language Institute of the University of Michigan or the Certificate of Proficiency in English from the University of Cambridge (University of Manitoba, 1961–1962, p. 48). This suggests that the requirement was not applied uniformly to all overseas students but was instead determined on a case-by-case basis by the university.

The policy noted that “failure in either of these tests will not automatically exclude overseas students” but could lead to modifications in their program (University of Manitoba, 1961–1962, p. 48). This suggests the tests were initially advisory rather than strict admission barriers. Additionally, students “may be required...to do an additional course or courses in English” at the discretion of the English Department Chair, indicating that test results primarily guided placement and language support rather than determining admission outright.

Although the calendar does not specify which students were required to take the test, it implies that decisions were made on a case-by-case basis, likely informed by applicants' educational backgrounds or previous language instruction. This flexible approach signaled the university's gradual move toward more formalized admissions criteria while maintaining some institutional flexibility.

By 1963–1964, the University of Manitoba’s language testing policy became more stringent, explicitly stating that “failure in one or the other of these examinations will mean rejection” (University of Manitoba, 1963–1964, p. 51). This marks a significant departure from the 1961–1962 policy, which had allowed for program modifications rather than outright exclusion. The shift in language indicates an increase in institutional control over admissions, emphasizing standardized proficiency as a formal prerequisite for university entry.

The university continued to rely on the English Proficiency Tests prepared by the University of Michigan’s English Language Institute and the Certificate of Proficiency in English from the University of Cambridge (University of Manitoba, 1963–1964, p. 51). However, while previous policies had implied some discretion, the 1963–1964 policy does not clarify whether exemptions or alternative assessments were available. The language suggests that students whose mother tongue was not English were now more uniformly subject to the testing requirement.

From a broader perspective, this period marks the beginning of framing English language proficiency as a formalized gatekeeping mechanism in higher education. Standardized testing began to function as a sorting device that favoured students with prior access to English-medium education and testing resources. This shift paralleled broader changes in Canadian immigration policy, particularly the 1962 regulations that abolished overt racial preferences in favour of skill-based selection criteria, including language proficiency (Hawkins, 1988).

While the university calendars do not provide detailed demographic data, the implementation of stricter language testing requirements likely had uneven impacts, particularly benefiting applicants from English-dominant regions and educational backgrounds. By embedding language proficiency within the admissions process, the university reflected

emerging national and global trends that emphasized measurable skills and academic competitiveness.

In 1965–1966, the University of Manitoba introduced a degree of flexibility for graduate students, allowing those who failed language tests to “be permitted on probation” (University of Manitoba, 1965–1966). However, this flexibility appears to have been temporary. It reflected a limited institutional recognition that academic qualifications could, in some cases, outweigh language test performance, particularly for graduate-level study. Meanwhile, at the undergraduate level, language requirements continued to tighten, suggesting an ongoing effort to regulate access more rigorously as international student numbers grew.

#### **Adoption of Full Standardized Testing (1966-1984)**

By the 1966-1967 academic year, the terminology changed from “overseas” to “international” students, reflecting a more global perspective and aligning with evolving discourses on internationalization in higher education. Following this, in 1970-1971, the introduction of TOEFL as a formal requirement signaled the beginning of a fully standardized approach to assessing English proficiency. Subsequently, in 1974-1975, the policy was tightened further, requiring that students “must demonstrate proficiency” through TOEFL, further institutionalizing standardized assessment in admissions practices.

By 1978–1979, a minimum TOEFL score of 550 was established as the threshold for admission, signaling a move toward more measurable and standardized criteria for English proficiency. This benchmark assumes that students can effectively understand lectures, participate in discussions, and complete academic reading and writing tasks at a university level. The adoption of this quantifiable standard represents a move toward more objective and measurable criteria for assessing language proficiency.

This period reflects the pervasive influence of neoliberal and internationalization principles, with language proficiency tests becoming increasingly standardized and commodified. The reliance on standardized testing framed language skills as market-driven assets, establishing explicit benchmarks that applicants were required to meet (McNamara, 1998; Shohamy, 2020). This shift illustrates how broader neoliberal values, emphasizing quantification, efficiency, and competition, began to permeate institutional practices (Olssen & Peters, 2005). This period laid the groundwork for entrenched language testing policies that continued to evolve in subsequent years.

This benchmark remained unchanged through the early 1980s, reflecting a period of policy stability in language assessment practices. It was not until the mid-1980s that new developments emerged, marking the beginning of a more rigorous and diversified approach to language proficiency testing.

### **Increased Rigour and Diversified Language Testing (1985-2009)**

By the mid-1980s, the University of Manitoba's language policies became more robust, reflecting a growing emphasis on quantifiable English proficiency. In 1985–1986, a minimum TOEFL score of 550 was maintained, but a new requirement mandated a minimum score of 50 in each component, writing, listening, speaking, and reading (University of Manitoba, 1985–1986, p. 11). This component-level benchmark aimed to ensure balanced proficiency, raising the admissions threshold and reinforcing expectations for comprehensive language competence.

In 1993–1994, the emphasis on the minimum TOEFL score was visually reinforced by bolding the text in the university calendar, signaling an institutional effort to reduce ambiguity in admission requirements and strengthen compliance. By 1996–1997, the introduction of alternative language testing options, such as IELTS, CanTEST, and the Michigan English

Language Assessment Battery (MELAB), provided applicants with greater flexibility in demonstrating proficiency.

These changes occurred alongside the growing influence of neoliberal policy frameworks in Canada, which emphasized globalization, market competitiveness, and the privatization of public goods (Sharma, 2006). The expansion of allowable language tests not only responded to the practical demands of a more internationalized student body but also mirrored the commercialization of higher education, where English proficiency became a commodified prerequisite for academic and economic mobility.

This institutional shift mirrored national immigration trends, as Canada increasingly prioritized skilled immigrants, including international students pursuing permanent residency (Kelley & Trebilcock, 2010). Language proficiency tests, thus, served dual roles regulating educational access and shaping immigration pathways. This entanglement with economic strategies positioned linguistic capital as key to academic and social mobility. From the late 1990s to the 2000s, the university's language policies remained largely stable, setting the stage for further reforms in the following decade.

### **Broadening Standardized Language Testing Options and Reinforcing Language Requirements (2010–2021)**

In 2010–2011, the University of Manitoba expanded its accepted English proficiency assessments to include the Pearson Test of English Academic (PTE Academic), thereby offering international applicants, additional pathways to demonstrate language proficiency. This change coincided with a steady rise in international student enrollment, with increasing representation from non-Anglophone regions such as China, India, and Nigeria (based on enrollment data from

2011 to 2021). The growing diversity and volume of applicants likely influenced the university's decision to broaden its accepted tests.

Developed by Pearson, a publicly traded global education and publishing company, the PTE Academic is a computer-based examination that evaluates candidates' abilities in speaking, writing, reading, and listening. As a for-profit organization, Pearson operates on a model that integrates educational services with commercial goals, positioning the PTE Academic as a fast, accessible, and globally available alternative. According to Pearson (n.d.), PTE Academic is “the faster, fairer, simpler English test,” with test-takers typically receiving their results within 48 hours.

By accepting multiple standardized tests, including TOEFL, IELTS, and later the PTE Academic, the university adopted a flexible admissions framework enabling students to select the testing product that best suited their circumstances. This shift also reflected the growing influence of standardized testing in global higher education and the market-driven orientation of language proficiency certification. The rise in allowable tests aligned with growing corporate interest in the educational assessment sector. Pearson, for example, reported a 21% increase in adjusted operating profit in 2010, illustrating the financial growth of language testing services during this period (Pearson, 2010).

In 2013–2014, the University of Manitoba introduced a test expiration policy requiring language proficiency scores to be no older than two years: “scores more than two years old are not acceptable” (University of Manitoba, 2013–2014, p. 33). While intended to ensure up-to-date proficiency, this policy imposed financial and logistical burdens on applicants, including those who had previously met the standard. Retaking tests is costly, as of 2025, TOEFL iBT costs \$205 USD and IELTS \$215–\$310 USD, with no retake discounts. These expenses can be prohibitive,

especially for lower-income students. Given that many international students during this period came from countries like China, India, and Nigeria (University of Manitoba, 2011–2015), this requirement disproportionately impacted applicants from the Global South.

At the same time, testing providers such as ETS (TOEFL) and the British Council (IELTS) benefitted financially from these requirements, as applicants were compelled to retest within short intervals. This dynamic highlights how standardized tests function not only as academic criteria but also as instruments within a commercial ecosystem tied to global education markets (Shohamy, 2020).

By 2018–2019, the language requirement's importance was reinforced through boldface and typographic emphasis in admission documents: "Please note: In all cases, test scores older than two (2) years are invalid" (University of Manitoba, 2018–2019, p. 81). The bolded text and inclusion of the numeral "2" underscored the strict enforcement of this rule and the institution's continued commitment to standardized testing as a core admissions criterion.

Yet, empirical research questions the necessity of strict test expiration policies. Tracy-Ventura et al. (2024) found that advanced second-language users showed little to no attrition in core skills over extended periods, even with reduced exposure after formal instruction. These findings raise doubts about whether test validity declines meaningfully within two years and suggest that expiration policies may function less as educational safeguards and more as mechanisms that reproduce the commercial logic of repeated testing.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, the University of Manitoba temporarily approved the Duolingo English Test (DET) for the 2020–2021 admissions cycle. The DET, an online, computer-adaptive exam, was introduced as an accessible, lower-cost, and fully remote alternative. While TOEFL and IELTS had previously moved to digital formats, they still required

designated test centres. In contrast, the DET was designed for at-home use, making it well-suited for pandemic-related disruptions.

Despite these benefits, the DET's validity for high-stakes academic settings has been debated. Yao (2023) reported that while test-takers generally viewed the DET as fair, many found the test content to be misaligned with academic demands. Similarly, Chen (2024) observed that although the DET reduced barriers, questions about its academic credibility led many institutions to continue favouring more established assessments.

This temporary policy shift illustrates both institutional adaptability during crisis and a strategic effort to sustain international enrollment, preserving tuition revenue and market presence. It also exposed heightened tensions between accessibility and academic rigour. As Isbell and Kremmel (2020) note, online testing introduced new inequities, with internet access and testing environments becoming additional gatekeeping factors. The adoption of DET shows that language testing remained a core mechanism of gatekeeping, even when framed as flexible or inclusive.

### **Discussion**

This discussion synthesizes key themes, showing how governmentality, neoliberalism, and internationalization have shaped language testing policies at the University of Manitoba. These policies function not merely as administrative tools but as technologies of governance, justified through discourses of rigour, accountability, and efficiency. Language testing dictates who gains academic access and under what terms. Reflecting on these dynamics reveals broader implications for equity, access, and the role of language as a state-sanctioned regulatory mechanism in global education.

**Neoliberalism, Governmentality, and the Institutionalization of Language Proficiency**

The institutionalization of language proficiency requirements at the University of Manitoba reveals a gradual transformation from informal oversight to formalized governance. Between 1950 and 1958, language expectations were minimal and inconsistently applied, with few written references in official documents. By 1961–1962, the university calendar began referencing standardized tests such as the University of Michigan English Proficiency Test and the Certificate of Proficiency in English from the University of Cambridge, noting that international students “*may be required*” to submit results (University of Manitoba, 1961–1962, p. 48). Although not universally mandated, this conditional phrasing marked the beginning of the university’s reliance on standardized language testing as a tool to assess and regulate international applicants.

By the mid-1970s, the policy had become more prescriptive. The 1975–1976 university calendar required international applicants to achieve a minimum TOEFL score of 550, establishing a fixed benchmark for admission (University of Manitoba, 1975–1976). This transition from discretionary evaluation to fixed-score requirements reflects a broader shift toward quantifiable, externally validated metrics aligned with neoliberal and managerial rationalities. The university no longer merely assessed general language readiness; it relied on third-party verification to authorize academic access.

These policy shifts are emblematic of what Foucault (2008) describes as governmentality: a form of institutional power exercised through mechanisms of surveillance, classification, and control. Language tests, through their standardization and external administration, functioned as techniques of institutional visibility. They allowed the university to monitor, differentiate, and evaluate applicants through uniform linguistic thresholds. Shohamy

(2020) similarly argues that such assessments are not neutral tools, but policy instruments that construct and enforce linguistic hierarchies.

In this case, the introduction of a 550 TOEFL minimum created a new institutional norm, one that positioned language proficiency as an externally certified credential to be purchased, tested, and proven. As such, it reflected broader market-oriented imperatives that valued efficiency, risk management, and selectivity over holistic or contextualized assessments. Standardized tests became technologies of governance, sorting students based on linguistic capital while reducing institutional responsibility for in-house evaluation.

### **Standardized Testing, Marketization, and the Regulation of Student Access**

At the University of Manitoba, the 1985–1986 calendar introduced a new requirement mandating that applicants not only achieve a minimum TOEFL score of 550 but also meet a minimum of 50 in each component: writing, listening, speaking, and reading (University of Manitoba, 1985–1986, p. 11). This represented a significant policy shift from previous years, which emphasized a general score threshold, to a more granular form of evaluation. The move toward component-specific benchmarks reflects an increasing emphasis on standardized, quantifiable language competence, one that aligns with neoliberal logics of performance measurement and accountability.

This focus on testable, segmental proficiency coincided with a diversification of approved language assessments. By the mid-1990s, the university formally recognized additional tests such as IELTS, CanTEST, and MELAB (University of Manitoba, 1996–1997), expanding the range of commercially available tests deemed acceptable for admissions. While framed as providing applicants with greater flexibility, this expansion reinforced the commodification of

English proficiency. Applicants were now expected to navigate a growing marketplace of language exams, each with its own fees, formats, and preparation requirements to demonstrate compliance with institutional standards.

Rather than developing internal assessments or support structures, the university increasingly outsourced language evaluation to private corporations such as ETS and IELTS, externalizing both the financial burden and the responsibility for linguistic gatekeeping. This mirrors what Bruzos (2023) describes as the commodification of language, the transformation of communicative ability into a marketable asset that students must purchase, test, and perform to gain institutional entry.

These systems functioned as global gatekeeping tools, standardizing access while embedding compliance with dominant linguistic norms (Foucault, 2008; Shohamy, 2020). Students were required to continuously invest in their linguistic capital through test fees, retakes, and coaching services, while the institution maintained control without bearing the cost of individualized assessment. In this sense, standardized testing was not only a tool for measuring readiness, it was a mechanism of institutional risk management, reinforcing neoliberal priorities of efficiency, accountability, and cost-reduction in university admissions.

### **Budgetary Constraints, Market Logics, and the Privatization of Language Testing**

At the University of Manitoba, the introduction and intensification of standardized language testing must be read against the backdrop of recurring austerity. In 1993, under Education Minister Rosemary Vodrey, the Manitoba government introduced sweeping funding cuts, including a \$16 million reduction to public education and a 2% cap on school tax increases. That same year, a 5% cap on university tuition growth severely restricted the institution's ability

to offset losses (Cole, 1993). Internal documents from the time flagged potential layoffs, course restrictions, and a need to maximize existing resources (Cole, 1993). These pressures pushed the university toward cost-saving strategies that reduced spending on services like in-house language assessment and ESL support.

Although there was a modest 3.8% increase in provincial university funding in the early 2000s (Martin, 2000a, 2000b), further budget reductions followed. In 2014, the administration requested faculties to prepare for consecutive 4% budget cuts (Cabel, 2014), and in 2020, the university faced projected reductions of up to 30% due to the COVID-19 pandemic (Kives, 2020). That same year, the province implemented a 5% cut to UM's operating grant, equating to a \$17.3 million shortfall (Gibson, 2020).

In this context, standardized testing served dual institutional goals. First, it externalized the cost of language assessment, shifting responsibility onto students and private testing companies like ETS and IELTS. Instead of hiring internal staff or creating equitable, context-sensitive evaluations, the university outsourced linguistic gatekeeping, reducing its own financial burden. Second, standardized tests offered pre-validated metrics that preserved the institution's reputation for rigour while enabling it to admit tuition-paying international students under the appearance of strict academic standards.

This dual logic helps resolve the apparent contradiction your reader flagged: while neoliberal reforms incentivize universities to recruit more international students, they also require institutions to demonstrate "accountability," "quality," and "efficiency", values embedded in standardized testing regimes (Olssen & Peters, 2005). The use of third-party English tests thus allows universities to sustain internationalization without expanding internal supports, reinforcing both financial and symbolic imperatives.

As Gardiner-Milln (2021) observes, neoliberal governance privileges metrics, market competition, and reduced public spending. Language tests, in this sense, are not neutral admissions tools but mechanisms that commodify English proficiency, converting language into a purchasable credential (Murray, 2016; Shohamy, 2020). At UM, this shift was not just ideological, it was materially linked to budgetary decision-making and risk management. By requiring applicants to bear the costs of high-stakes testing, the university protected its financial interests while maintaining the appearance of fairness and rigour. For example, in the 2020–2021 calendar, the university temporarily approved the Duolingo English Test (DET) for admissions, noting that it was “approved on a temporary basis due to COVID-19 disruptions” (University of Manitoba, 2020–2021, p. 32). While this flexibility was framed as a response to global crisis, it allowed the university to maintain international enrollment revenue while reducing administrative costs illustrating market responsiveness through policy.

However, this system disproportionately disadvantaged students from the Global South, who face high testing fees, limited access to preparation services, and greater barriers to retaking exams. As Shohamy (2020) argues, such assessments function as regulatory tools that uphold dominant linguistic norms while reproducing global hierarchies of mobility and access.

### **Internationalization and Market Competitiveness**

Internationalization has increasingly been framed not only as a pathway to global engagement, but as a competitive strategy for attracting fee-paying students, enhancing institutional rankings, and securing a stronger position in the global higher education market. By the late 20th century, Canadian universities were repositioned as globally competitive market actors. Rather than serving purely educational goals, internationalization became embedded in

neoliberal strategies that positioned institutions as revenue-generating enterprises (Altbach & Knight, 2007).

At the University of Manitoba, this discursive and policy shift can be seen in the 1966–1967 Academic Calendar, where the term “overseas students” was replaced with “international students” (University of Manitoba, 1966–1967, p. 7). While this change may appear semantic, it aligns with broader shifts in policy language that sought to frame international students not as peripheral participants, but as strategic contributors to institutional growth and competitiveness. This rebranding signaled the university’s orientation toward a global student market and the commodification of education as an exportable service.

This market orientation coincided with the expansion of recognized English proficiency tests during the 1990s and 2000s. While TOEFL remained dominant, UM added alternatives like IELTS, CanTEST, and MELAB to its admissions policy (University of Manitoba, 1996–1997; 2002–2003). The university’s inclusion of these options offered a façade of flexibility but also mirrored the growing influence of private test providers in global education systems. These assessments, often developed and sold by for-profit corporations such as ETS and Cambridge Assessment, reinforced the view of English as a purchasable skill and language testing as a high-stakes commercial industry (Pearson, 2023; Shohamy, 2006).

Rather than expanding access, this diversification transferred financial and logistical burdens to students, who were now expected to prepare for and finance standardized tests from commercial providers. For many, meeting admission requirements meant significant investment in costly preparation courses, repeated test attempts, and travel to testing centres, conditions that disproportionately affected applicants from the Global South. This dynamic reflects a consumer-driven model of education, where students function as paying clients navigating a privatized

testing marketplace. The recurrence of these costs, especially for applicants facing institutional cutoffs or retake requirements, exemplifies Bruzos' (2023) shift from "discourses of pride" to "discourses of profit" in global English education (p. 152).

UM's reliance on standardized testing served dual roles: signaling quality assurance to regulatory bodies and funders while also filtering applicants through financially mediated access points. This dual function is clearly visible in the 2013–2014 Academic Calendar, where a bolded note states: "In all cases, test scores older than two (2) years are not acceptable" (University of Manitoba, 2013–2014, p. 33). By enforcing a rigid expiration window, the university reinforced standards of accountability while also generating repeat test-taking, aligning with the financial structures of test providers like IELTS and ETS. As Piller and Bodis (2024) argue, such measures create the appearance of inclusion while reinforcing exclusionary norms, privileging those with the economic means to comply.

Finally, UM's adoption of multiple commercial testing options and its enforcement of strict validity policies illustrate a broader trend toward outsourcing regulatory functions to corporate actors. This aligns with Ong's (2006) concept of neoliberal governmentality, whereby state or public institutions delegate key functions to market-based agents. English language testing becomes a tool not of linguistic readiness, but of market discipline, structuring access based on economic capacity and alignment with Western linguistic norms. As Shohamy (2006, 2020) emphasizes, such tests do not neutrally assess competence; they entrench linguistic hierarchies under the guise of objectivity.

### Conclusion

While this study critiques the growing reliance on standardized language tests, it also acknowledges that universities operate within broader accreditation, funding, and policy constraints. Still, the commodification of language proficiency, evident in evolving policies like the 2013–2014 test expiration rule, reflects neoliberal pressures to maintain current skills (Dang & Dang, 2023). Such measures, though framed as upholding standards, disproportionately burden underprivileged applicants. Language proficiency, thus, becomes both a credential and a barrier, serving institutional interests while reinforcing inequities. By tracing the University of Manitoba's policy evolution, this study calls for a critical re-evaluation of how language testing is framed and implemented in Canadian higher education.

Moving forward, the challenge is to reimagine language testing beyond rigid, commodified frameworks. As Jenkins (2018) and Shohamy (2022) argue, universities must critically reassess their reliance on standardized assessments that privilege monolingual, Anglo-centric norms. More inclusive models, such as portfolio-based assessments showcasing written, oral, and reflective work, or integrating English for Academic Purposes (EAP) coursework, can better reflect multilingual competencies. Embracing such approaches would promote linguistic inclusivity and disrupt the marketization of language proficiency, fostering more equitable access.

Such a reimagining is especially urgent given the deepening financial dependence of Canadian universities on international student tuition. As Patel (2022) warns, this dependency reflects a broader trend in which international education is framed as a revenue stream rather than a public good, raising critical questions about sustainability and access. This structural

reliance invites further reflection on how institutions conceptualize access, educational value, and the role of international students within postsecondary education.

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## Appendix A

Table 1

**Historical Shifts in English Language Proficiency Requirements at the University of Manitoba**

Year/Period	Data Segment	Codes Applied
Before 1959	No English requirement was listed in the academic calendar.	No Language Regulation
1959-1960	Informal English test required for students whose mother tongue is not English.	Informal Testing Introduction (Inductive), Light Institutional Control (Deductive: Governmentality)
1961-1962	Overseas students may be required to take the University of Michigan or Cambridge proficiency tests.	Standardization Begins (Deductive: Neoliberalism), Discretionary Policy (Inductive)
1963-1964	Failure in proficiency tests results in rejection for undergraduate students.	Exclusionary Practices (Deductive: Neoliberalism), Increased Regulatory Control (Deductive: Governmentality)
1965-1966	Special circumstances allow graduate students to proceed on probation despite failing the test.	Policy Flexibility (Inductive), Merit over Language (Inductive)
1966-1967	Replacement of “overseas” with “international” for students.	Terminology Update (Inductive), Global Positioning (Deductive: Internationalization)
1970-1971	Introduction of “English Facility Requirement” to submit evidence of proficiency in English.	Formal Standardization (Deductive: Neoliberalism), Language as Gatekeeping Tool (Deductive: Governmentality)
1974-1975	TOEFL becomes mandatory for all applicants whose first language is not English.	Mandatory Standardization (Deductive: Neoliberalism), Commodification of English Skills (Deductive: Neoliberalism)

1978-1979	Minimum TOEFL score of 550 introduced for non-Canadian citizens.	Score Benchmarking (Deductive: Neoliberalism), Increased Rigour in Requirements (Deductive: Governmentality)
1984-1985	Removal of exemptions for certain applicants regarding English requirements.	Reduction of Flexibility, Uniformity in Language Standards (Deductive: Governmentality)
1985-1986	TOEFL requirement includes a minimum score of 50 in each component.	Component-Specific Regulation (Deductive: Governmentality), Quantified Competency (Deductive: Neoliberalism)
1993-1994	Requirements emphasized in bold to stress importance.	Visual Emphasis on Compliance (Inductive)
1996-1997	Multiple testing options introduced (TOEFL, IELTS, CanTEST).	Diversification of Testing Options (Deductive: Neoliberalism), Consumer Choice (Inductive)
1998-1999	Waivers introduced for visa applicants with relevant education, capitalization for emphasis.	Flexibility through Waivers (Inductive), Emphasis on Requirement (Inductive)
2000-2001	AEPUCE introduced as an alternative to prove proficiency.	New Pathway for Language Proficiency (Inductive), Institutional Adaptability (Deductive: Internationalization)
2001-2002	Cambridge proficiency certificate accepted as a language proficiency option.	Increased Pathways to Admission (Inductive), Expansion of Testing Products (Deductive: Neoliberalism)
2004-2005	CAEL test introduced as an option.	Expanding Test Portfolio (Deductive: Neoliberalism), Alignment with Canadian Standards (Inductive)
2007-2008	Internet-based TOEFL introduced with detailed score requirements.	Digital Adaptation in Language Testing (Inductive), Detailed Score Requirements (Deductive: Governmentality)

2009-2010	Faculties may require specific tests or higher scores.	Faculty Autonomy (Inductive), Layered Regulatory Control (Deductive: Governmentality)
2010-2011	Pearson Test of English (PTE) added to proficiency options.	Further Market Diversification (Deductive: Neoliberalism), Student Flexibility (Inductive)
2013-2014	Emphasis on non-acceptance without proof of scores.	Strict Enforcement (Deductive: Governmentality), Increased Institutional Control (Inductive)
2016-2017	Undergraduate pathway via International College of Manitoba introduced.	Local Pathway Integration (Inductive), Retention Strategy (Deductive: Internationalization)
2018-2019	Test score validity emphasized (test scores older than two years are invalid).	Temporal Commodification (Deductive: Neoliberalism), Heightened Regulatory Compliance (Inductive)
2019-2020	Duolingo accepted temporarily during COVID-19 pandemic.	Crisis Adaptation (Inductive), Market Responsiveness (Deductive: Neoliberalism)

*Note.* Data were sourced from the University of Manitoba academic calendars and analyzed using a combination of inductive and deductive thematic coding. The codes reflect theoretical frameworks of neoliberalism, internationalization, and governmentality.

## Appendix B

**Table 2**  
**International Student Enrollment (Undergraduate and Graduate) at the University of Manitoba**

Year	International Student Enrollment (%)
2011	9.6%
2012	10.1%
2013	11.4%
2014	13.2%
2015	16.2%
2016	16.9%
2017	17.9%
2018	18.9%
2019	19.8%
2020	20.5%
2021	21.9%
2022	22.2%
2023	22.7%

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*Note.* Data are drawn from the *Students by Citizenship* reports published annually by the Office of Institutional Analysis at the University of Manitoba. These reports are publicly available online from Fall Term 2011 to the present.

#### **Chapter 4: Beyond the Test: Affective Governance and International Students' Experiences of English Language Policy in Canadian Higher Education**

Standardized English language testing is a central requirement for international students seeking admission to Canadian universities and, often, for post-graduation immigration eligibility. These tests, such as IELTS, TOEFL, and CELPIP, and more recently the Duolingo English Test, are commonly framed as objective and merit-based tools for assessing academic readiness. Duolingo, released in 2016 as a fully online, AI-proctored assessment, has been marketed as a faster, cheaper, and more accessible alternative, and gained traction during and after the COVID-19 pandemic (Drew & Edward, 2024; Tabassum, 2023). Yet for students, the experience of preparing for and taking these tests, whether traditional or digital, is far more complex. This paper explores how English language proficiency testing is not simply a gatekeeping mechanism but a lived process of emotional, bodily, and strategic negotiation.

While existing research has established that high-stakes language tests reinforce linguistic hierarchies and neoliberal ideals of meritocracy (Phillipson, 2013; Shohamy, 2006; Zeng, Ponce, & Li, 2023), this study offers a different angle. Drawing on qualitative interviews and artifact elicitation with international students at the University of Manitoba, I argue that standardized testing governs not only access to education and immigration, but also students' feelings, movements, relationships, and sense of self. The study shows how students internalize institutional expectations and respond with self-discipline, sacrifice, and creative forms of agency, often at great personal cost.

In particular, the paper traces four interrelated themes: the emotional strain and anxiety produced by testing; the economic pressures that shape daily routines and decisions; the institutional surveillance that invalidates students' lived linguistic realities; and the strategic, yet

constrained, forms of navigation and resistance students employ. Together, these narratives reveal that standardized English testing functions as a system of affective governance, one that disciplines students not only through institutional rules and score thresholds, but through emotional regulation, bodily sacrifice, and daily routines. It governs how students live, study, and belong.

Theoretically, the analysis is informed by Foucauldian governmentality (Foucault, 1991) and its extensions in critical language testing (Shohamy, 2020, 2022), critiques of neoliberalism in language education (Piller & Cho, 2013; Sharma, 2024), and scholarship on linguistic imperialism and neo-imperialism (Phillipson, 2013; Zeng et al., 2023). These frameworks are used not to lead the argument, but to follow where participants' experiences point, showing how language policy materializes in bodies, emotions, and everyday rituals.

Methodologically, the study adopts a reflexive, student-centred approach. Participants were invited not only to share their stories, but to bring or describe artifacts that symbolized their testing experiences, offering entry points into the sensory, symbolic, and affective dimensions of this policy landscape through a method known as artifact elicitation. The findings and discussion are presented together, using participant narratives as the central evidence and theoretical framing as a tool to deepen, not overshadow, the analysis.

This paper contributes to the field by shifting attention from the technical dimensions of testing to the lived experiences of those who are most affected. It argues that understanding the politics of language testing requires attending to how power operates not only through institutional rules, but through the intimate and often invisible forms of regulation, emotional discipline, financial burden, and strategic self-management that students carry with them every

day. In doing so, it calls for a more embodied and accountable approach to language assessment in international education.

### **Theoretical Framework**

This study is guided by a critical theoretical approach that examines how power, ideology, and institutional structures shape international students' experiences with standardized English language testing in Canada. It draws on the interrelated concepts of governmentality, neoliberalism, and linguistic imperialism to analyze how testing functions as a mechanism of regulation, market stratification, and exclusion in higher education.

First, Foucauldian governmentality offers a lens to understand how language tests operate not merely as neutral assessments but as technologies of control that, in Foucault's (1995) terms, produce "docile bodies" (pp. 135–136), a critique extended by Shohamy (2020, 2022) in their analysis of the disciplinary power of language testing. Within this framework, institutions such as universities and immigration authorities govern student conduct by normalizing certain forms of linguistic behaviour and performance. The standardized testing regime instills self-discipline and surveillance, compelling students to internalize expectations of ideal academic and social subjects. Through this lens, English proficiency tests become tools of biopolitical governance, regulating who is granted access to education, residency, and belonging.

Second, the concept of neoliberalism helps illuminate how English language testing is embedded in broader logics of marketization, individual responsibility, and economic value. Neoliberal ideologies frame international students as self-investing, mobile workers whose language skills must be continuously optimized for global competitiveness (Piller & Cho, 2013; Sharma, 2024). Proficiency tests are not only admission requirements but also indicators of

“human capital,” aligning with immigration policies that favour those who can demonstrate immediate economic productivity. This shift, as Deygers and Malone (2019) argue, reflects institutional pragmatism and branding over pedagogical concerns. Students are, thus, required to manage their own linguistic capital, often at great personal cost, to meet shifting institutional thresholds.

Linguistic imperialism, as originally theorized by Phillipson (1992), refers to the structural and ideological processes through which English is constructed as a global norm and imposed as a prerequisite for participation in academic, economic, and political life. Traditionally, this framework emphasized the role of colonial histories, educational systems, and geopolitical relations in sustaining English dominance. More recent work has expanded this analysis, demonstrating how linguistic imperialism now operates through neoliberal mechanisms that present English as a marketable skill, a form of human capital, and an unquestioned requirement for mobility (Zeng & Yang, 2024; Zeng, Ponce, & Li, 2023).

Standardized tests such as IELTS, TOEFL, CELPIP, and Duolingo are central to this contemporary landscape. These assessments function as technologies that legitimate particular forms of English, typically white, middle-class, Anglophone norms, while rendering other linguistic repertoires deficient or illegitimate. They also externalize the costs of English acquisition onto individuals, reinforcing neoliberal ideals of self-management, personal responsibility, and market alignment. In this sense, linguistic imperialism is not only a geopolitical or historical process but also a form of affective governance: students come to internalize testing expectations as measures of their worth, discipline themselves according to test constructs, and interpret their success or failure through emotional and moral registers.

Integrating this framework with governmentality and neoliberalism enables this study to conceptualize English proficiency testing as a system that governs not only access but also subjectivity. Governmentality explains how power is exercised through normalization and self-regulation; neoliberalism explains why individuals are compelled to manage themselves as entrepreneurial subjects; and linguistic imperialism reveals what is being normalized, English as the unquestioned standard of legitimacy and belonging. Together, these concepts position standardized testing as a key mechanism through which global hierarchies of language and power are reproduced within Canadian higher education.

### **Literature Review**

Standardized English language testing is now a central mechanism for regulating international student access to higher education, both globally and in Canada. Over the past two decades, scholars have examined how tests such as IELTS, TOEFL, and CELPIP operate as tools of academic selection and immigration control, embedding admissions processes within broader systems of governance (Shohamy, 2020; Jenkins & Leung, 2016; Wonnacott, 2024). Critical scholarship has traced these tests to colonial language ideologies (Phillipson, 1992), highlighted their commercialization and commodification (Kell & Vogl, 2012), and shown how they reproduce linguistic hierarchies that privilege standardized, native-like English (Kubota, 2016; Zeng et al., 2023).

In Canada, the stakes are heightened by the tight coupling of higher education admissions with federal immigration pathways. Proficiency tests simultaneously determine entry into universities and eligibility for economic immigration streams (Ferrer et al., 2014; Tamtik et al., 2020). While often framed as measures of academic readiness, institutional policies vary widely in which tests they accept, the thresholds they set, and the exemptions they allow (Wonnacott,

2024). These inconsistencies reflect not only pedagogical differences but also neoliberal imperatives around market positioning, recruitment targets, and perceived risk management (Brunner, 2017; Savage, 2017).

Much of the existing literature addresses the policy and structural dimensions of English language testing, but less attention has been paid to the lived, embodied experiences of the students who navigate these requirements. Where student perspectives are included, research has tended to focus on outcomes such as stress, financial cost, and misalignment between test content and classroom demands (Clark & Yu, 2021; Hamid et al., 2019; Shohamy, 2022), often casting students as passive recipients of policy rather than as agents who interpret, resist, and adapt to institutional expectations.

Much of the existing literature addresses the policy and structural dimensions of English language testing, but less attention has been paid to the lived, embodied experiences of the students who navigate these requirements. The following sections examine the political economy, national policy context, and existing research on student experiences to situate this study within broader debates on language testing and governance.

### **The Political Economy of Standardized English Language Testing**

While traditional assessment scholarship has focused on issues of reliability and validity (e.g., Farhady, 2018), critical language testing perspectives argue that technical quality cannot be separated from the sociopolitical contexts in which tests operate (Shohamy, 2020; Kunnan, 2018). Standardized English language tests such as IELTS, TOEFL, and CELPIP are often framed as neutral tools for measuring academic readiness or immigration eligibility. However, a growing body of scholarship challenges this assumption, emphasizing how these tests are

embedded in broader political, economic, and ideological systems. Shohamy (2020, 2022) critiques language testing as a form of institutional control, arguing that tests function as technologies of surveillance that reinforce dominant norms and shape individuals' educational and migratory pathways. Rather than simply assessing ability, these exams discipline student behaviour, regulate access, and legitimize institutional power.

Several scholars have drawn attention to the colonial and ideological foundations of standardized English language testing. Phillipson's (1992, 2013) foundational theory of linguistic imperialism reveals how the global spread of English, particularly in education, has perpetuated hierarchies rooted in colonial histories. Tests like IELTS and TOEFL, though presented as globally relevant, are based on Eurocentric norms of English usage that marginalize multilingualism and reinforce native-speaker models (Jenkins & Leung, 2016; Kubota, 2016). Zeng, Ponce, and Li (2023) expand this critique through the concept of linguistic neo-imperialism, which highlights how English dominance is now maintained less by force and more through policy infrastructures, institutional norms, and internalized expectations. These dynamics are particularly visible in countries like Canada, where English testing is normalized despite the nation's official commitment to multiculturalism.

Commercialization is another key dimension of this political economy. As Kell and Vogl (2012) argue, English proficiency testing has evolved from an educational mechanism into a profit-driven global industry. Students invest significant time and money into coaching, preparation materials, and repeat testing attempts, creating a multi-billion-dollar testing economy that benefits private companies while exacerbating global inequalities. The commodification of English proficiency, what Duchêne and Heller (2012) refer to as language as capital repositions

language not as a communicative practice, but as a purchasable credential tied to mobility, status, and economic opportunity.

In short, standardized English language testing operates as an instrument of governance, shaped by linguistic hierarchies, marketization, and global power. These forces are especially visible in Canada, where testing policies intersect with immigration pathways and institutional recruitment, a convergence examined in the next section.

### **English Language Testing in Canadian Higher Education and Immigration Policy**

In Canada, standardized English language proficiency testing plays a dual role: it functions both as a gatekeeping mechanism for university admissions and as a core requirement for immigration eligibility. This convergence of educational and immigration policy intensifies the stakes of language testing for international students, embedding their academic success within broader regimes of migration governance and economic stratification. Since the introduction of the points-based immigration system in 1967, language has been positioned as a measurable indicator of integration, employability, and human capital (Ferrer, Picot, & Riddell, 2014). Tests like IELTS, CELPIP, and TOEFL now operate across institutional and federal levels, linking educational access to migration pathways and reinforcing the logic of meritocratic selection (Shohamy, 2020).

Scholars have shown that Canadian universities increasingly frame language proficiency requirements in terms of academic readiness, yet the implementation of these policies is inconsistent across institutions. Wonnacott (2024) documents significant variation in the types of tests accepted, score thresholds required, and exemptions offered, with some institutions recognizing up to 13 different pathways to meet English language proficiency (ELP) standards.

These differences suggest that language policy decisions are often shaped by institutional priorities, such as recruitment goals, market competitiveness, and risk management, rather than pedagogical alignment or equity considerations (Brunner, 2017; Savage, 2017).

Despite significant investment in test preparation, research suggests standardized scores offer limited insight into actual academic readiness. Numerous studies have examined the predictive validity of IELTS and similar tests for international students (e.g., Arrigoni & Clark, 2015; Breeze & Miller, 2008; Dang & Dang, 2023; Ingram & Bayliss, 2007; Kerstjens & Nery, 2000). While results vary, many find that IELTS scores only partially reflect preparedness, especially in discipline-specific writing, participation, and communication (Clark & Yu, 2021; Humphreys et al., 2012). Clark and Yu (2021) caution against overreliance on these scores, noting that IELTS merely assesses whether students are ready to begin studying in English and covers only some of the features of language used in academic study, a limitation often overlooked by institutions and immigration authorities.

Nevertheless, despite questions about their predictive validity, the use of standardized language tests has expanded in step with broader neoliberal trends in Canadian higher education. Universities have increasingly adopted market-based governance models emphasizing efficiency, accountability, and global competitiveness (Tamtik, Trilokekar, & Jones, 2020; Webb, 2015). Within this context, international students are often viewed simultaneously as sources of revenue and as future skilled immigrants, with language tests acting as streamlined tools for both admissions and labour market sorting (Trilokekar & Jones, 2020). Bamberger, Morris, and Yemini (2019) argue that this logic reduces language to a functional asset and reconfigures higher education as a mechanism for economic filtering rather than inclusive learning.

At the same time, the ideological foundations of language testing clash with Canada's official multiculturalism policy. While multiculturalism affirms the value of linguistic and cultural diversity (Kymlicka, 2010), standardized English proficiency tests privilege narrow forms of language use rooted in native-speaker norms, undermining the pluralism that multiculturalism claims to protect. Jenkins and Leung (2016) highlight this contradiction, noting that ELP policies often assess students on rigid, decontextualized criteria that ignore multilingual repertoires and discipline-specific communication needs.

Taken together, these critiques show that English language testing in Canada is not only an academic prerequisite but also a policy instrument shaped by immigration regimes, market imperatives, and colonial language ideologies. For international students, this dual role creates layered pressures, pressures that extend beyond admissions and into their everyday academic and migratory lives. How these pressures are experienced, negotiated, and resisted by students themselves is the focus of the next section.

### **International Students' Lived Experiences of Standardized Testing**

A substantial body of research documents the emotional, financial, and academic consequences of standardized English language testing for international students. These high-stakes exams are commonly associated with anxiety, self-doubt, and repeated testing attempts, particularly when students narrowly miss required scores (e.g., Hamid et al., 2019; Shohamy, 2020). In addition to the psychological toll, students often face considerable economic burden, not only from exam fees but also from ancillary costs such as tutoring, preparation materials, and travel to distant test centres (Kell & Vogl, 2012; Pearson, 2019). Importantly, these effects often persist beyond admission, as many students discover that meeting test requirements does not necessarily prepare them for the communicative realities of university life.

Even after achieving the required scores, many international students found that standardized tests failed to reflect the communicative demands of university life (Barkaoui, 2025; Ockey & Gokturk, 2019). Clark and Yu (2021) note that students who meet admissions thresholds still struggle with academic writing, discipline-specific language, and participation in seminars. Despite passing standardized tests, students may lack confidence in their English ability, especially when facing unfamiliar academic discourses (Barkaoui, 2025). Institutions rarely offer targeted support once students are admitted, reinforcing the assumption that test scores equate to full preparedness.

Recent empirical research at the University of Manitoba further complicates this assumption: Worae and Edgerton (2023) found that while most international students did not report overt language barriers, a significant minority experienced anxiety around verbal expression, particularly fear of grammatical errors during presentations and difficulty articulating ideas under pressure. These findings suggest that passing a standardized test like IELTS or TOEFL does not necessarily equate to communicative confidence or competence in real university settings. These ongoing challenges are not only a matter of individual preparedness but are deeply linked to the social and political conditions in which language testing operates.

Scholars have also emphasized how these experiences are shaped by broader structures of power. Standardized testing regimes often reflect and reproduce racialized and class-based inequities, privileging students from English-dominant or elite educational backgrounds while marginalizing multilingual and racialized learners (Flores & Rosa, 2015; Piller & Cho, 2013; Kubota, 2016). These dynamics are not just technical flaws but ideological ones, rooted in dominant norms of “proper” English that obscure the value of linguistic diversity.

Despite these structural constraints, students are not passive recipients of policy. Many develop tactical forms of resistance and adaptation, strategies like memorizing test templates, practicing under simulated conditions, or deciphering scoring rubrics, to meet institutional expectations (Canagarajah, 2012; Pilcher & Richards, 2017). While these strategies demonstrate resilience and agency, they also highlight the limited communicative value of the tests themselves, which reward test-taking performance over authentic language use.

Finally, research points to a lack of transparency and stakeholder engagement in the design and implementation of language policies. Institutional decisions about test requirements are often made without meaningful consultation with students or language assessment experts, resulting in rigid policies that fail to reflect actual communicative needs or equitable practices (Deygers & Malone, 2019).

Together, these studies reveal a critical gap in how institutions understand and respond to international students' language testing experiences. While testing policies are often framed as administrative necessities, their implementation carries profound emotional, financial, and pedagogical consequences. Yet little research has examined these processes from the perspective of students themselves, showing how high-stakes English testing is lived through emotional discipline, economic sacrifice, institutional surveillance, and strategic navigation. This study addresses that gap through artifact-elicited interviews with international students at a Canadian university, foregrounding the embodied and politicized ways they experience, and at times resist, standardized English language policy.

### Methodology

This study employed a qualitative design to explore international students' experiences with standardized English language testing as part of their admission to the University of Manitoba. This approach is particularly suited to this topic, enabling a deep exploration of international students' lived experiences, affective responses, and critical reflections on language testing policies (Creswell & Poth, 2016). Unlike quantitative approaches emphasizing measurement and statistical generalization, qualitative research prioritizes context, meaning-making, and individual subjectivity (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018).

The study is grounded in a constructivist and interpretivist epistemology, recognizing that knowledge is socially constructed and shaped by context (Guba & Lincoln, 1994). Within this perspective, international students' interactions with language testing policies are understood as mediated by institutional structures, personal histories, and broader power dynamics in higher education (Van Manen, 2016).

To capture these complex experiences, semi-structured interviews served as the primary data collection method. Semi-structured interviews allowed participants to articulate their narratives freely, while enabling the researcher to probe emerging themes (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2015). This approach is particularly effective in capturing nuanced accounts of students' challenges, strategies, and perceptions related to their experiences with standardized language tests and the policies that govern them (Brinkmann, 2013; Ryan, Coughlan, & Cronin, 2009).

Artifact elicitation further enriched the qualitative inquiry. Participants were invited to bring symbolic objects, images, or written pieces representing their experiences with language testing. Artifact elicitation added a multimodal dimension to the study, prompting participants to

express aspects of their experiences that may be difficult to articulate verbally (Kahlke et al., 2024; Mannay, 2010). This method is particularly effective in eliciting emotional, symbolic, and memory-laden dimensions of identity and institutional experience (Gauntlett & Holzwarth, 2006; Leavy, 2022).

While qualitative methods offer rich insights, they carry inherent limitations, including subjectivity in participants' responses and researcher interpretations (Tisdell, Merriam, & Stuckey-Peyrot, 2025). To enhance trustworthiness, reflexive journaling was employed throughout the research process, examining how my background and assumptions might influence analysis. As Creswell and Poth (2016) note, the aim is not generalizability but rather the production of context-rich insights that may inform institutional reform and future research.

### **Participant Recruitment and Selection**

After receiving institutional research ethics approval (see Appendix A), participants were recruited through purposive sampling, which is well-suited to qualitative research for identifying individuals with relevant, first-hand experience (Creswell & Poth, 2016). Eligible participants were current international students (graduate or undergraduate) at the University of Manitoba who had taken a standardized English proficiency test (e.g., IELTS, TOEFL, CELPIP, or Duolingo) for university admission.

Recruitment involved email outreach via student associations and printed flyers posted in high-traffic areas (e.g., cafeterias and lounges), each featuring QR codes linking to consent and eligibility forms. Over 50 expressions of interest were received in the first week, reflecting widespread engagement and concern among international students. From this pool, 12 participants were selected to ensure variation in linguistic background, region of origin, and

academic level (see Appendix B, Table 1), while maintaining a manageable scope for in-depth analysis and ensuring participant anonymity through the use of pseudonyms.

### **Data Collection**

Interviews were conducted online via Microsoft Teams during July and August 2024, lasting 60–90 minutes, and were audio-recorded with participants' consent before transcription. The semi-structured protocol explored students' English learning histories, test preparation experiences, and perceptions of test difficulty. It also addressed emotional responses, such as stress and anxiety, alongside institutional policies, academic preparedness, and suggestions for improvement. Participants reflected on artifacts that symbolized their testing journeys, adding depth to the emotional and symbolic aspects of their narratives. This method enriched the data by linking individual experiences to broader institutional and sociopolitical structures.

### **Data Analysis**

Data were analyzed using reflexive thematic analysis as outlined by Braun and Clarke (2021), following a recursive process that integrated both inductive and deductive strategies. The goal was not only to identify recurring patterns in participants' accounts, but also to interpret those patterns through the critical theoretical lenses of governmentality, neoliberalism, and linguistic imperialism.

I began by immersing myself in the data, reading each transcript multiple times and listening to the audio recordings to note initial impressions, emotional tone, and non-verbal cues. Familiarization was followed by initial coding. I developed inductive codes directly from participants' language (e.g., "I kept blaming myself," "I memorized a template," "I cried after the score came"), which reflected themes such as self-blame, test-taking rituals, and emotional

exhaustion. Alongside this, I applied deductive codes informed by my theoretical framework (e.g., “surveillance,” “commodification,” “filtering”) to flag excerpts that engaged with broader structures of power and policy.

Once initial coding was complete, I conducted multiple rounds of iterative sorting and comparison, clustering codes into potential themes. For instance, inductive codes like “stress,” “burnout,” and “fear of failure” were grouped under emotional strain, while deductive codes such as “economic filtering” and “paying again” supported the theme of economic barriers. Themes were refined using a constant comparison approach, where I returned to the data repeatedly to test their coherence, depth, and distinctiveness. I also actively searched for negative cases or contradictory narratives to complicate and nuance emerging themes.

To ensure trustworthiness, I engaged in several strategies. First, I kept a reflexive journal throughout the research process to track analytic decisions, moments of emotional identification, and theoretical tensions. This helped me differentiate between patterns grounded in the data and my own assumptions or reactions. Second, I created detailed analytic memos for each theme, including justifications, representative quotes, and counterexamples.

Final themes, emotional strain, economic barriers, academic misalignment, and institutional power were selected based on their resonance across multiple participants, conceptual significance, and relevance to the study’s theoretical framework. They are presented in the findings section using representative quotes, with interpretation grounded in the socio-political critique of standardized testing and its effects on international students.

### Findings and Discussion

This section presents the integrated findings and discussion of the study, organized thematically to highlight how international students' lived experiences with standardized English language testing reflect not only academic pressures, but also forms of affective and embodied governance. Rather than separating findings from analysis, I merge them to illustrate how students' emotional, physical, and strategic responses to language testing are shaped by institutional norms, immigration constraints, and broader systems of power.

Drawing on the theoretical frameworks of governmentality (Foucault, 1991), neoliberalism, and linguistic imperialism (Shohamy, 2006; Zeng, Ponce, & Li, 2023), I argue that English proficiency testing governs students not only through policy and score thresholds, but through their daily rituals, emotional labour, and bodily routines. Participants' coping strategies, such as ritualized dress, sleepless study schedules, or symbolic artifacts, reveal how language policy is internalized and lived, regulating not only what students do, but how they feel, move, and remember.

To deepen this analysis, participants were invited to bring or describe artifacts that symbolized their testing experiences. These ranged from notebooks and test preparation materials to drawings and personal mementos. Such artifacts offered insights into how students remembered and made meaning of the test not merely as an academic hurdle, but as a socially and emotionally charged event. A more detailed analysis of these artifacts will be developed in a separate publication, but select examples are integrated here to ground and enrich the discussion that follows.

### **Emotional Strain and Anxiety Surrounding Testing**

The emotional toll of standardized English language testing emerged across nearly every participant narrative. But what stood out was not only the intensity of the stress, but the deeply embodied ways students lived with, responded to, and coped with that pressure, through exhaustion, ritual, and physical adaptation. In this section, I show how students' emotional experiences became etched into their routines and environments, revealing how testing functions not only as academic selection, but as a form of affective governance that regulates the body and self.

Jing, a master's student from China, described how the IELTS writing band became a fixed wall in her life:

I had to take IELTS four times. I was just stuck at 6.5 in writing. I was so frustrated. I was doing everything, and nothing changed. (Interview with Jing, July 2024)

She recalled staying up late, trying to change her study methods, but always falling short:

I tried videos, I joined one class, but still no difference. It made me feel like I'm not improving... like something is wrong with me. (Interview with Jing, July 2024)

Her voice conveyed fatigue and disillusionment, not only with the test, but with herself. Jing's emotional response wasn't just disappointment; it was internalized failure, brought on by a system that equated progress with scores and effort with quantifiable improvement.

Sora, an undergraduate student from South Korea, described how test anxiety became a structured part of her daily life:

Every one or two hours, I like went outside... there was this very small spot next to the parking lot. And I was always smoking there. (Interview with Sora, July 2024)

When asked why that became a routine, she said:

I needed some excuse to go outside and relax. I think I wanted to find something that I can escape from. (Interview with Sora, July 2024)

Sora's smoking breaks were not random but deliberate, regulated acts of release within an otherwise high-pressure routine. She described the university library as a space of anxiety where she spent hours practicing, a place she did not enjoy but felt she had no choice but to use.

Her movement between library and parking lot became a ritual of control, one where the body was both regulated and released. These micro-routines reflect how institutional expectations of discipline and productivity became embodied through space and habit.

Farzana, a master's student from Bangladesh, described a routine of extreme sacrifice. She spent her days managing household tasks, studied until 4 or 5 a.m., and left for the office by 7 a.m. Over time, her body began to fail under the pressure. She recalled constant fatigue and family expectations that left her torn between responsibilities at home and the relentless demands of test preparation:

It felt like the test was asking everything from me, and I had to give everything to pass. (Interview with Farzana, July 2024)

Anaya, a student from India, brought her light pink shirt to our interview, an artifact she wore on her test day. She said she had a strong connection to it, wearing it again for our meeting because “it’s like it helps me” (Interview with Anaya, July 2024). The shirt, she explained, made her feel calm and connected to home. This ritualized act of dress became a way of carrying memory and selfhood into a depersonalized institutional process.

These participants did not just talk about stress; they showed how testing shaped their actions, their bodies, and their environments. Their emotional regulation through smoking, study patterns, clothing, or sleepless nights was not accidental. As Ahmed (2013) argues, emotions are not simply personal but regulated and produced through social and institutional power. These rituals were not about preference; they were required forms of survival. Here, a formal institutional rule, the fixed score threshold, set the conditions, but its reach extended far beyond compliance, shaping students’ emotions, bodily routines, and sense of self in ways the policy never explicitly names.

Through the lens of governmentality (Foucault, 1991), these practices show how students internalize institutional norms. They manage themselves physically and emotionally to align with expectations. The demand to “pass” the test is absorbed as a demand to regulate the self. Even though participants rarely named language ideology explicitly, their efforts revealed how standardized English becomes a kind of moral obligation, one that must be earned through sacrifice, discipline, and repetition.

This extends critiques of linguistic imperialism (Phillipson, 1992) and linguistic neo-imperialism (Zeng, Ponce, & Li, 2023), by showing that English testing does not just marginalize, it governs through the body. Farzana’s exhaustion, Sora’s spatial routines, Anaya’s

pink shirt, these are the emotional residues of a system that operates as both gatekeeper and disciplinarian.

What this paper contributes is a more embodied and affectively grounded understanding of high-stakes language testing, as revealed through participants' narratives. Rather than treating stress as a backdrop to testing, their stories show how emotional labour becomes central to it, ritualized, material, and gendered. Emotional discipline, as their accounts suggest, is not a side effect of policy but one of its primary technologies. These emotional responses are inseparable from the economic pressures students face. Together, these embodied and emotional experiences illustrate how students come to feel and absorb the dominance of English in their daily lives, revealing the lived, micro-level expressions of linguistic imperialism. As the next section shows, financial strain is not merely a logistical hurdle, it governs students' choices, routines, and feelings of worth.

### **Sacrifice, Scarcity, and Self-Blame: The Embodied Weight of Economic Pressure**

While financial barriers to English language testing are well documented, what emerged in participants' narratives was not simply the high cost of exams, but the way economic pressure shaped their daily lives, emotional states, and bodily limits. Students did not just describe the test as expensive, they described it as a system that demanded sacrifice, restructured family responsibilities, and heightened feelings of guilt, failure, and obligation. In this way, financial burden became a form of affective governance: something students internalized and managed through overwork, self-denial, and relentless persistence.

Nadia, a master's student from Bangladesh, explained that she spent heavily on IELTS coaching, only to pay again when she did not reach the required score the first time. The expense

left her feeling “like I wasted everyone’s money” (Interview with Nadia, July 2024). The guilt she described was not only about cost, it was about disappointing her family and falling short of expectations. Her parents had contributed financially without complaint, but she knew “it was too much,” and the pressure made it harder to focus. Economic scarcity here translated into emotional strain, creating a feedback loop of stress and self-blame that shaped both her finances and her sense of accountability to others.

Lina, a student from Bahrain, echoed this:

Where I’m from, it’s not just a test; it’s like a big investment. It’s not just your money, it’s your family’s money. So you don’t want to fail. (Interview with Lina, July 2024)

Here, “investment” was not a metaphor, it was a social contract. Her body and mind carried the weight of collective sacrifice. Failure wasn’t framed as a lack of skill, but as a waste of communal resources, a failure to justify the cost.

Leila, from Iran, emphasized the inequity of pricing, saying the test cost “like one month’s salary of an entry-level position, it’s huge” (Interview with Leila, July 2024). Similarly, Naveen, from Sri Lanka, observed that someone earning minimum wage would spend “almost 50% of [their] monthly income on the IELTS test” (Interview with Naveen, July 2024). For both, the cost was not only an economic burden but also a source of physical and emotional strain. Leila recalled that when she failed to reach the required score, she kept thinking, what if I can’t afford to do this again? a worry that left her unable to sleep (Interview with Leila, July 2024).

This sleeplessness, like Farzana’s late-night study routine, reflects how financial pressure becomes internalized. Testing affects not just bank accounts, but energy, sleep, and mental

health. It teaches students to push harder, endure more, and blame themselves for outcomes that are shaped by structural conditions.

Kian, a PhD student from Iran, added another layer of geopolitical anxiety. Because of international sanctions, he explained:

There were constant threats that the British Council centres could shut down at any moment. Everyone I knew... lived in constant fear of needing to travel to another country for testing. (Interview with Kian, July 2024)

This fear was not abstract. He spent months monitoring news, budgeting for possible international travel, and preparing backup plans, “always calculating” the cost of going to Turkey or the UAE and whether a visa would be needed (Interview with Kian, July 2024). For students like Kian, financial burden was compounded by geopolitical precarity, where access to language testing, and by extension, education and immigration was conditioned by global politics entirely outside their control. Still, the expectation remained that students find a way, absorb the cost, and manage the consequences alone.

These narratives reveal that financial pressure under standardized language testing is not just structural, it is embodied, affective, and self-regulating. Students adjusted their routines, pushed their physical limits, and absorbed responsibility for outcomes shaped by global inequality. Economic strain was not only material, it became an emotional force, compelling students to overwork, suppress distress, and hold it together for the sake of success. In this way, an explicit requirement to pay for and achieve a qualifying score became an invisible mechanism of governance, regulating students’ choices and family life as much as their academic trajectories.

**Institutional Power, Surveillance, and the Invalidation of Linguistic Realities**

Participants described the institutional surveillance embedded in English language testing requirements, especially when they were asked to prove proficiency repeatedly, despite extensive prior experience using English in academic or professional contexts. For many, legitimacy was not something granted once, but something to be continually performed through narrowly recognized metrics.

Mateo, a multilingual PhD student from Colombia, was required to retake IELTS because his previous score had expired, despite having completed a full master's degree in English and conducting his research in English daily. He recalled, "I had done everything in English... but I had to prove it again. Just because the test was 'too old'" (Interview with Mateo, July 2024). His experience illustrates how testing policies operate as what Foucault (1995) calls technologies of control, tools through which institutions regulate time, behaviour, and belonging.

This wasn't just about timelines; it was about whose English counted. Leila reflected on score thresholds: "They said 7 in writing. But why not 6.5?" (Interview with Leila, July 2024). Her comment pointed to the arbitrariness of linguistic gatekeeping and the sense that institutional rules were misaligned with real communicative needs. Kian and Eli, both of whom had grown up speaking English, were also asked to submit recent IELTS scores. Eli shared, "I'm fluent, but still they made me take it again. It felt like they didn't believe me" (Interview with Eli, July 2024).

For these students, English was not just a means of communication, it was a credential, one that needed to be repeatedly demonstrated and renewed. This aligns with Zeng et al.'s (2023) argument that dominant institutions uphold linguistic neo-imperialism by privileging a narrow,

Eurocentric model of English while dismissing other forms of fluency. Students with multilingual backgrounds, postcolonial histories, or English-medium education outside the Global North were particularly vulnerable to this kind of invalidation.

Naveen, a PhD student from Sri Lanka, described how this logic extended into funding decisions. He shared a screenshot of an email from his supervisor delaying a research assistantship until he submitted an IELTS score. “Once I did IELTS... it made a good impression,” he said (Interview with Naveen, July 2024). His performance of English proficiency became a form of currency, not because it altered his competence, but because it satisfied institutional optics.

These experiences reflect what Schissel (2024) calls racialized gatekeeping, where students from non-Western or multilingual backgrounds are required to repeatedly prove their worth through dominant linguistic standards. Even after admission or academic success, participants felt watched, assessed, and never fully accepted. The sense of surveillance was not metaphorical, it was built into how funding, access, and legitimacy were distributed.

As Shohamy (2020) and Schissel (2024) argue, standardized English language testing functions as a mechanism of governance, reinforcing neoliberal ideals of meritocracy while obscuring the structural inequities that shape students’ linguistic realities. The participants’ stories show how language becomes both the medium and the barrier: a credential that institutions require, regulate, and mistrust, especially when it comes from the “wrong” places or bodies. These experiences reveal how English continues to function as an unequal global standard, positioning certain accents, histories, and educational backgrounds as less legitimate, an everyday expression of linguistic imperialism within university policy.

### **Strategic Navigation and the Limits of Agency**

Despite facing structural barriers, many participants demonstrated agency in managing the demands of standardized language testing. Their stories revealed not passive acceptance, but careful, strategic efforts to understand and outmaneuver the rules of standardized language testing. Through self-directed learning, peer collaboration, and informal networks, they developed creative approaches to meet institutional expectations, even when those expectations felt misaligned with real academic life.

Strategic preparation emerged as an important tool for navigating the pressures of high-stakes exams. Rather than approaching the test as a pure measure of language ability, students treated it as a system to be decoded. Sora described how she “found this online group where people exchanged tips” and how following a strict schedule “worked” (Interview with Sora, July 2024). Anaya spoke even more explicitly: “I had to game the system... like use their keywords and patterns to get the score” (Interview with Anaya, July 2024). Her comment reflected a deep awareness that success depended less on authentic language use and more on aligning with specific performative cues embedded in the test design.

Leila echoed this: “I am just good at taking tests,” she said. “Even as someone who takes the exams well, I feel guilty sometimes” (Interview with Leila, July 2024). Her reflection highlighted how scoring well was not always a sign of linguistic competence, but of having mastered the techniques and strategies the exam rewards. She contrasted her experience with that of a friend who received a lower score: “It wasn’t about English. She was just nervous that day” (Interview with Leila, July 2024). Such insights point to how the tests reward test-taking fluency over real-world proficiency, often disadvantaging students whose communication strengths may not align with the exam’s narrow format.

Lucia, from Mexico, recalled how this disconnect continued into the classroom: “Even though I passed the test, I still felt lost in the first term” (Interview with Lucia, July 2024). What caught her off guard was how differently English was used in Canadian classrooms compared to the test setting. “The way people speak in classes is very different,” she explained (Interview with Lucia, July 2024). For her and others, test preparation emphasized speed, clarity, and structure but not how to engage in disciplinary discourse, manage informal academic conversations, or adapt to dynamic learning environments.

These stories complicate deficit-based portrayals of international students as underprepared or linguistically lacking. Instead, they reflect what Canagarajah (2012) calls strategic agency under constraint, the ability to work within institutional limits while still exerting control over one’s outcomes. Students like Anaya, Leila, and Lucia were not simply adapting, they were performing forms of expertise, testing insight, and social navigation that revealed an acute understanding of how to succeed under pressure.

Eli brought this critique to life with humour. He shared a cartoon image of a banana on the road, meant to symbolize his frustration with having to take IELTS despite speaking English fluently. “It just shows how absurd it is,” he said (Interview with Eli, July 2024). For Eli, the cartoon was more than a joke, it was a commentary on the misalignment between lived linguistic experience and bureaucratic gatekeeping. His satire underscored the emotional and ideological contradictions embedded in high-stakes English testing.

There were also quiet forms of resistance and solidarity. Kian spoke about the drawings he exchanged with a friend during the test prep period: “They were conversation starters... for conversations that never happened” (Interview with Kian, July 2024). These sketches, passed in silence, became a symbolic form of connection. In the context of isolation and stress, even small

creative acts became meaningful ways of asserting presence and care within rigid institutional structures.

Across these accounts, the resourcefulness of students is unmistakable but so too are the inequities that make such resourcefulness necessary. Their creativity, vulnerability, and grit illuminate how deeply flawed the systems are that govern access to education. As Zeng and Yang (2024) caution, resilience often arises from exclusion rather than liberation. The burden of adaptation rests almost entirely on students, while institutions rarely question the fairness, validity, or humanity of the requirements they impose.

Together, these narratives reveal how English language testing operates as a multi-layered system of governance, one that regulates access not only through institutional policies, but through students' emotions, bodies, finances, and social practices. Across themes of emotional labour, economic strain, surveillance, and strategic navigation, students described how they internalized the burdens of performance and legitimacy, often at great personal cost. Their stories challenge narrow understandings of language proficiency as an individual skill and instead position testing as a site of affective discipline and neoliberal subject formation. What emerges is not simply critique, but a call to rethink language assessment as a deeply political, embodied, and uneven process, one that reflects broader power structures and demands institutional accountability.

### **Conclusion**

This paper argues that standardized English language testing functions not simply as a gatekeeping mechanism, but as a system of affective governance, one that regulates students through emotional discipline, bodily sacrifice, and strategic conformity. Drawing on the

experiences of international students at the University of Manitoba, and informed by the theoretical frameworks of governmentality (Foucault, 1991; Shohamy, 2022), neoliberalism (Piller & Cho, 2013; Sharma, 2024), and linguistic imperialism (Phillipson, 1992; Zeng et al., 2023), this study shows that testing shapes how students feel, move, sacrifice, and relate to themselves and others. It is not merely a neutral or technical process, but a deeply embodied and politicized structure of control.

While prior research has documented the emotional, financial, and pedagogical challenges of standardized English proficiency testing (e.g., Clark & Yu, 2021; Hamid et al., 2019; Shohamy, 2022), this study demonstrates how those challenges function as technologies of governance, regulating students' emotions, bodies, and everyday routines through institutionalized expectations, surveillance, and market logics.

Participants' narratives pointed to four key forms of regulation: the emotional strain and anxiety that governed their routines and identities; the economic burdens that demanded self-blame, overwork, and family sacrifice; the institutional surveillance that invalidated lived linguistic realities; and the strategic, yet constrained, acts of navigation through a system students understood as both arbitrary and necessary. These themes demonstrate that language testing governs affectively and materially, through discipline, repetition, exhaustion, and performativity, positioning students as neoliberal subjects responsible for their own adaptation, resilience, and success.

In doing so, this study also advances scholarship on linguistic imperialism by showing how English dominance is not only institutional or historical, but lived and felt through students' emotional labour, financial sacrifice, and repeated demands to prove legitimacy. The findings reveal the micro-level, affective dimensions of linguistic imperialism: how global hierarchies of

English become embodied in students' exhaustion, self-blame, strategic conformity, and the invalidation of their multilingual expertise. By grounding linguistic imperialism in everyday routines and affective experiences, this research extends the concept beyond structural analysis and demonstrates how it operates as a form of governance in contemporary higher education.

Importantly, the study moves beyond treating students as passive recipients of policy. Instead, it highlights their critical awareness and agentic responses: from rituals of emotional stability, to decoding test logic, to subtle acts of resistance and satire. These strategies illustrate what Canagarajah (2012) describes as strategic agency under constraint, while also revealing the uneven burdens such strategies entail. The demand for resilience was gendered, racialized, and classed, often requiring students to absorb systemic inequities through silence, self-regulation, and embodied labour.

The use of artifact elicitation enriched the analysis by foregrounding the symbolic and emotional dimensions of students' experiences, objects like Anaya's pink shirt or Eli's cartoon banana served not just as memories, but as critiques of institutional logic. These artifacts illuminated the emotional intelligence and symbolic meaning-making that accompany high-stakes testing, elements often overlooked in policy discourse.

Ultimately, this study contributes to scholarship on language policy and international education by centering students' voices as knowledge-holders and reframing standardized testing as a system of affective governance rather than a neutral assessment. The findings call on universities and policymakers to rethink the assumptions underpinning current English proficiency policies. Rather than relying on rigid thresholds and standardized metrics, institutions must move toward more equitable, context-sensitive, and student-informed approaches. These could include flexible pathways to demonstrate language proficiency, such as

portfolio-based assessments, interview-based evaluations, or waivers for students with prior English-medium education. Such alternatives recognize linguistic diversity, material inequity, and the hidden costs borne by those subjected to high-stakes testing regimes.

As someone who has inhabited the roles of international student, test-taker, and educator, I approached this research with deep personal investment and critical reflexivity. These roles shaped my engagement with participants, whose insights challenged me to see testing not only as policy, but as lived structure felt through the body, negotiated through ritual, and remembered through loss and persistence. Their stories do not simply critique language testing; they expose its human cost and demand more accountable systems that resist affective governance and center the dignity of the students they assess.

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Appendix A **Ethics Approval Letter****University  
of Manitoba****Research Ethics and Compliance**Human Ethics - Fort Garry  
208-194 Dafoe Road  
Winnipeg, MB R3T 2N2  
T: 204 474 8872  
humanethics@umanitoba.ca**PROTOCOL APPROVAL**

Effective: June 27, 2024

Expiry: June 26, 2025

Principal Investigator: Golnaz Shirzadi  
Advisor(s): Melanie Janzen  
Protocol Number: HE2024-0046  
Protocol Title: *Language Requirements for International Students: An Investigation of Policies and Students' Experiences*

Liz Millward, Chair, REB2

**Research Ethics Board 2** has reviewed and approved the above research. The Human Ethics Office (HEO) is constituted and operates in accordance with the current *Tri-Council Policy Statement: Ethical Conduct for Research Involving Humans- TCPS 2 (2022)*.

This approval is subject to the following conditions:

- i. Approval is granted for the research and purposes described in the protocol only.
- ii. Any changes to the protocol or research materials must be approved by the HEO before implementation.
- iii. Any deviations to the research or adverse events must be reported to the HEO immediately through an REB Event.
- iv. This approval is valid for one year only. A Renewal Request must be submitted and approved prior to the above expiry date.
- v. A Protocol Closure must be submitted to the HEO when the research is complete or if the research is terminated.
- vi. The University of Manitoba may request to audit your research documentation to confirm compliance with this approved protocol, and with the UM *Ethics of Research Involving Humans* [Ethics of Research Involving Humans](#) policies and procedures.

## Appendix B

**Table 1**  
**Final Participant Table with Artifacts**

Pseudonym	Region	Test Taken	Program	Notable Context
Mateo	Colombia	IELTS (2x)	PhD	Retook test after score expiry; had prior English-medium MA and publications but wasn't exempt.
Jing	China	TOEFL (3x), IELTS	Master's	English teacher for 10+ years; took IELTS for immigration.
Lucia	Mexico	TOEFL (2x)	Master's	Self-prepared with digital tools; struggled with perfectionism and real-time speaking anxiety.
Kian	Iran	TOEFL, IELTS	PhD	Multilingual with international background; prepared through targeted courses and mock exams.
Naveen	Sri Lanka	IELTS	Master's	Prepared under tight timeline while working full-time.
Eli	Philippines	IELTS	Master's	Grew up in an English-speaking household and studied in English-medium schools; prepared independently in under a week.
Leila	Iran	IELTS	Master's	Began self-studying English as a teen; prepared under a tight

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				timeline using a short university-run class.
Farzana	Bangladesh	IELTS (GT + Academic), Duolingo	Master's	Balanced full-time work with prep; retook tests for PR.
Anaya	India	IELTS	PhD	Juggled long workdays with quiet early mornings of test prep; carved out time for applications while keeping her plans private from her workplace.
Sora	South Korea	IELTS	Undergraduate	Spent months studying full-time at an academy after switching majors; studied daily at the library and used breaks to decompress outdoors.
Lina	Bahrain	IELTS	Master's	Attended English-medium school early on; transitioned to public school with private tutoring; achieved high score with short test prep.
Nadia	Bangladesh	IELTS (GT + Academic), Duolingo	Master's	Studied late at night while caring for young children and working full-time; completed 14 prep books in 5 weeks across two test sittings.

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Note. GT = General Training.

### Chapter 5: Conclusion

This dissertation examined the expanding role of English language proficiency testing in shaping Canadian immigration and higher education policy, using a grouped-manuscript format to trace the issue from multiple angles. Informed by governmentality (Foucault, 1991, 2008), neoliberalism (Brown, 2015), and critical language testing (Shohamy, 2020, 2022), the study argues that language tests function not merely as neutral measures of communicative ability but as multi-scalar technologies of governance. They regulate mobility, sort and categorize applicants, and discipline individuals in ways that are economic, institutional, and affective (Flores & Rosa, 2015; Piller & Cho, 2013; Zeng, Ponce, & Li, 2023).

Although each manuscript addresses a different scale of language policy, together they reveal a coordinated system through which English proficiency testing governs mobility, opportunity, and belonging. Manuscript one examined the macro-level evolution of language requirements in Canadian immigration policy, showing how English proficiency became tied to neoliberal ideals of productivity, human capital, and economic worth. At this level, test scores determine who may enter Canada and under what conditions, framing English as a prerequisite for national inclusion.

Manuscript two traced the institutionalization of these logics within the University of Manitoba. Through archival analysis, the study showed how the university progressively outsourced language assessment, adopting standardized testing as a risk-management and internationalization strategy. This meso-level analysis demonstrates how universities internalize federal priorities by embedding test-based requirements into admissions and policy decisions, further normalizing commercialized forms of English as the benchmark of readiness.

Manuscript three brought these structural forces into the everyday lives of international students. Through interviews and artifact elicitation, the study illustrated how students experience testing as emotionally taxing, financially burdensome, and deeply embodied. Their narratives show how federal policy and institutional practices are lived at the micro level—through anxiety, self-discipline, ritualized coping, economic sacrifice, and strategic navigation.

Across these manuscripts, a clear through-line emerges: immigration policies establish English as a condition of mobility; universities reinforce this condition through institutionalized testing regimes; and students absorb the consequences in their bodies, emotions, and daily routines. Reading these levels together reveals that standardized English testing is not merely an assessment tool, but a multi-scalar apparatus of governance linking national policy, institutional practice, and personal experience.

### **Unified Contribution**

This dissertation demonstrates that standardized English language testing functions as a multi-scalar mechanism of governance, operating simultaneously at the federal, institutional, and individual levels. At the federal level, language testing aligns with economic immigration goals by selecting migrants according to benchmarks that appear objective yet are deeply tied to racialized, gendered, and geopolitical assumptions about who will integrate well (Flores & Rosa, 2015; Guo, 2013; Sharma, 2020). Within the points-based system, proficiency scores are treated as quantifiable evidence of human capital, privileging those who can purchase and repeatedly perform standardized English while disadvantaging applicants from the Global South and other historically marginalized groups (Piller & Bodis, 2024; Shohamy, 2020).

At the institutional level, universities such as the University of Manitoba have outsourced responsibility for language assessment to global test providers, embedding gatekeeping practices into internationalization strategies while offloading financial and logistical risk onto applicants (Brunner, 2017; Stein et al., 2022). At the level of lived experience, international students described testing as not only cognitively demanding but also emotionally, financially, and socially consequential. Their accounts of sleepless study routines, family sacrifice, and symbolic coping rituals underscore the affective power of standardized testing (Ahmed, 2013; Canagarajah, 2012).

Taken together, these levels reveal several overarching contributions of the dissertation. One contribution is the demonstration that testing operates as a system of affective governance. Across contexts, language testing regulates not only access but also emotions, bodies, and subjectivities, extending Foucault's (1991) concept of governmentality into the embodied domain. A second contribution lies in showing how testing has been commodified and outsourced. By delegating language assessment to corporate providers such as ETS, institutions and states transform English proficiency into a purchasable credential, reinforcing neoliberal logics of accountability and cost-shifting (Bruzos, 2023; Murray, 2016).

A further contribution is the illumination of testing as a racialized and gendered filter. Standardized benchmarks privilege Eurocentric registers of English and devalue other linguistic repertoires, producing exclusions that disproportionately impact migrants from the Global South and women concentrated in care work (Guo, 2013; Kubota, 2016; Schissel, 2024). Finally, this dissertation highlights the agency and resistance that students enact within constraint. While deeply regulated, students demonstrate strategic forms of navigation, gaming test systems,

creating peer networks, and critiquing institutional arbitrariness, which reveal both resilience and the uneven burdens of adaptation (Canagarajah, 2012; Zeng & Yang, 2024).

By combining macro-level policy analysis, meso-level institutional history, and micro-level student narratives, this dissertation shows that English language testing cannot be understood in isolation. Rather, it is a system of governance that is simultaneously economic, institutional, and affective, one that defines who may enter, study, and belong in Canada.

### **Theoretical Contributions**

The dissertation advances three interrelated theoretical frameworks, governmentality, critical language testing, and linguistic imperialism by grounding them in the historical, institutional, and lived realities of English language policy in Canada. Across the three manuscripts, the analysis shows that governance works not only through rules, policy instruments, or institutional structures but also through affective and embodied forms of self-regulation.

Extending governmentality, the research demonstrates how language policy governs through economic rationalities (such as human capital), through institutional rationalities (such as risk management and efficiency), and through affective expectations that students internalize in their study routines, emotional states, and bodily practices. This multi-scalar analysis shows that governance operates through affect, material conditions, and self-discipline, not only through administrative rules.

Deepening critical language testing theory, the dissertation adds both temporal and embodied dimensions to Shohamy's work. It historicizes the rise of commercialized testing, tracing how assessment became outsourced, corporatized, and aligned with market efficiency,

while also illustrating how students govern themselves through test preparation rituals, financial sacrifice, and symbolic artifacts that shape their sense of self and possibility. This reveals how testing exerts disciplinary power over time, across institutions, and within the body.

The research also reframes linguistic imperialism by demonstrating how English dominance is not only geopolitical or ideological but also emotionally and materially lived. Despite Canada's official commitments to multiculturalism, immigration and higher education policies continue to prioritize Eurocentric, testable forms of English. Universities reinforce this hierarchy through their choice of recognized tests, privileging native-speaker norms and commercialized assessment products over context-dependent measures. Students then experience the everyday consequences of these hierarchies through repeated invalidation, financial burden, and pressure to conform to narrow linguistic ideals.

Collectively, the three manuscripts shift how governmentality and neoliberalization are typically theorized in language policy research. Whereas much scholarship focuses on administrative rules or national policy instruments, this research demonstrates that neoliberal governance is also affective and embodied: it emerges in students' emotional regulation, self-discipline, and financial sacrifice. By linking federal policy, institutional practices, and lived experiences, the research reframes neoliberal governmentality as a multi-scalar process that operates simultaneously through economic logics, institutional outsourcing, and intimate forms of self-governance.

Taken together, these contributions advance the field of language policy and assessment by demonstrating that standardized English testing must be understood not as a discrete requirement, but as a dynamic system of governance that spans immigration, higher education, and students' daily lives. This multi-scalar analysis challenges the tendency within the field to

treat these domains separately, showing instead that they are co-constituted through shared neoliberal, racialized, and affective logics. By integrating historical policy analysis, institutional governance, and lived experience, this dissertation offers a framework for studying language testing that foregrounds power, embodiment, and material conditions in ways that have been largely overlooked.

### **Implications for Policy and Practice**

Findings from this dissertation underscore that both immigration and higher education systems rely on commercialized, standardized testing in ways that reproduce inequities and offload responsibility onto individuals. Whether framed as ensuring economic readiness for migration or academic preparedness for university study, English language proficiency tests function as privatized gatekeeping tools. They privilege those with financial means, test-taking literacy, and geographic access to testing centers, while disproportionately burdening students and migrants from the Global South, women concentrated in care work, and individuals from multilingual or non-Eurocentric backgrounds (Guo, 2013; Schissel, 2024; Shohamy, 2020).

This convergence of immigration and higher education logics reveals a need to move away from standardized commercial testing as the dominant model and toward more equitable, context-sensitive, and pedagogically informed approaches. Alternatives such as diagnostic assessments, portfolio-based evaluations, interview-based measures, or English for Academic Purposes coursework can better reflect the communicative realities students face in classrooms and workplaces. Such models also redistribute responsibility, recognizing that readiness is relational and systemic rather than an individual burden to be purchased and proven through high-stakes testing.

At the policy level, transparency and accountability are essential. Policymakers and institutions must interrogate why specific scores are required, for whom, and under what assumptions. They must also ask whose linguistic repertoires are recognized and whose are devalued. Embedding language policy within equity audits and gender-based frameworks would make explicit the racialized and gendered exclusions that are often obscured by claims of objectivity. At the same time, if institutions and states continue to profit from international students and migrants through tuition and immigration fees, they have an obligation to reinvest in accessible language supports rather than shifting the costs of compliance onto individuals.

Reimagining assessment as a bridge rather than a barrier requires not only technical reform but also political will: a commitment to policies that value multilingual competence, reduce inequitable burdens, and foster genuine inclusion

### **Limitations and Future Research**

This study's scope was necessarily bounded by time, geography, and available data. The policy analysis focused on federal immigration and one university's historical practices. Future research might expand to include provincial comparisons, Francophone institutions, or a broader range of student demographics, including refugee claimants or temporary foreign workers.

The qualitative analysis drew on 12 international students' experiences, providing rich, situated insights but not statistical generalizability. Future research could adopt a longitudinal design to examine how language testing shapes students' academic, professional, and migration trajectories over time.

There is also scope for comparative research examining how other countries or postsecondary institutions implement non-commercialized, multilingual, or context-specific

assessments. Investigating the institutional conditions that make these alternatives viable would provide valuable evidence for policy reform.

### **Final Reflections**

This dissertation was written not only as a scholar, but as someone whose life has been shaped by language requirements policy. The questions I pursued here were never only theoretical; they were rooted in my own journey and in the stories that others generously shared with me. Engaging with these narratives has underscored that language testing is not a neutral, technical measure, but a system of governance with profound social, economic, and emotional consequences.

Across federal immigration, university policy, and individual experience, this research has shown that language tests act as sorting mechanisms that shape who is admitted, who belongs, and who is excluded. These mechanisms are neither accidental nor inevitable; they reflect historical, political, and economic logics that can be reimaged.

Students in this study reminded me that while policy constrains, it never fully determines. Their strategies, acts of resistance, and moments of care point to the possibility of assessment practices that recognize multilingual competence, reduce inequitable burdens, and prioritize genuine communicative needs. Current systems are shaped by a narrow set of actors, value certain language practices over others, and ultimately benefit some while harming others.

If language tests are here to stay, then we have a responsibility to redesign them or replace them with tools that function as bridges rather than gates. Such change requires not only technical innovation, but also political will and a shift in how we imagine language's role in education, migration, and belonging. This work is part of an ongoing conversation in applied

linguistics, language policy, and migration studies, a conversation that must continue if we are to build systems that are more equitable, more accountable, and more human.

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