

French Second Language Proficiency Test 2

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This article is the second of a series describing CASLT's work to develop a French Second Language proficiency test. The first article (*Réflexions*, October 2003) provided background to this work by outlining who believes an FSL proficiency test is needed and why. The first article also compared provincial/territorial FSL program structure, curriculum, and existing tests to determine how much provinces/territories had in common in terms of content standards¹ and performance standards.² (Content and performance standards form the basis for test specifications.) The comparison showed remarkable agreement among provinces/territories concerning the competencies required to be proficient in FSL (i.e. content standards) although they differ greatly in the degree of detail in describing these competencies, particularly those for communication: some programs provide general outlines for communication; some describe communication in greater detail, some provide detailed descriptions for each skill. In addition, the comparison showed that each province/territory organizes its FSL programs differently and sets its own standards for achieving these outcomes accordingly. What is missing for the development of a French Second Language proficiency test, therefore, is a national system of standards which provides sufficient detail and scope for achievement to accommodate all provinces/territories.

¹ content standards - an analysis of target language use situations and the performance(s) which the test is intended to predict)

² performance standards (i.e. a descriptive taxonomy of how well candidates know and are able to do what is set out in the content standards)

Introduction

This second article will look at where standards fit in the process of test development. For this purpose, we will examine standards in the development process of three national tests: the Public Service Commission Test, the Centre for Canadian Language Benchmarks Test, and the US National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP). These examples will further clarify what is meant by standards and the role they play in test development.

Public Service Commission Test

The first example is the Public Service Commission Test. In the Public Service, all jobs requiring the use of both official languages are termed "bilingual" positions. The Public Service Commission developed the Second Language Evaluation (SLE) System, composed of a set of three tests (oral interaction, reading, and writing) and second language standards, to determine whether candidates meet the second language requirements of these positions.

The first step was the development of second language standards (which include both content and performance standards). These standards were developed from lists prepared by managers in the Public Service of language tasks in each skill (reading, writing, and oral interaction) required to carry out the duties and responsibilities of specific jobs. They outline communicative tasks and the contexts in which they take place as well as describing linguistic proficiency that reflects the accuracy levels and other requirements for employees in bilingual positions to function effectively. They include details such as factors affecting language performance (i.e. context: informal meeting), performance conditions (i.e. face-to-face or telephone), and constraints (i.e. may make many errors...).

These standards are divided into three levels: A-lowest to C-highest. Each level is sub-divided by skill (oral interaction, reading, writing). Table 1 below outlines the standard requirements for Level B oral interaction. This is the minimum level in oral interaction for positions that involve departure from routine or repetitive second language use. It is expected that Core French graduates could potentially function successfully at this level with some initial training in vocabulary and tasks.

Level B

is the minimum level of second language ability in oral interaction that should be identified for positions that involve departure from routine or repetitive use of the second language. A person at this level can sustain a conversation on concrete topics, report on actions taken, give straightforward instructions to employees, and provide factual descriptions and explanations. While many errors and deficiencies in grammar, pronunciation, vocabulary and fluency may occur, these do not seriously interfere with communication. However, a person at this level should not be expected to cope with situations that are sensitive or that require the understanding or expression of subtle or abstract ideas. The ability to deal with situations involving hypothetical ideas and the use of persuasion is also limited. Examples of some tasks which can be performed at Level B of oral interaction are as follows:

- handling requests for routine information from other employees or members of the public (either by telephone or in face-to-face conversations) about such things as services, publications or competitions;
- participating in informal meetings or work sessions dealing with such matters as the assignment of work, steps to be followed, priorities or deadlines;
- giving factual accounts to colleagues or investigators of actions taken or events that have occurred; and,
- giving and following instructions or explanations about how work is to be done, what information is needed and what steps or alternatives are to be followed.

(Determining the Linguistic Profile for Bilingual Positions - online)

These second language standards form the link between the requirements for bilingual positions and the three tests: jobs are classified according to these three levels and results on the tests are expressed in terms of these same proficiency levels. This allows a clear understanding of what is required for certain positions by both candidates and employers.

Canadian Language Benchmarks

The second example is the Canadian Language Benchmarks Test. In 1992, the Federal Government introduced a new Immigrant Language Training Policy which stated that Canada should have a clear set of language performance standards as a basis for developing reliable tools to assess the language skills of learners. In order to achieve this goal, the government formed a national working group of twenty people to oversee the design, field testing, and revision of a set of Language Benchmarks and to make sure that there was enough input from the field. In 1995, a draft version was field tested across the country by 3,000 people (2,000 learners, 500 ESL teachers, and 500 administrators of ESL institutions, curriculum developers, academics, etc.). Revisions to the document were made based upon input received from the field test.

The resulting Language Benchmarks (descriptions of a person's ability to use the English language to accomplish a set of tasks) provide:

- a nationally accepted measure of language acquisition
- consistency of outcomes for learners across the country
- a set of reference points for teachers to use when assessing a learner's language abilities,
- information to learners both on what they have learned and what they have yet to learn,
- a clear statement of a person's language ability for administrators, teachers, employers, settlement workers, etc.,
- a common basis for assessment of both learners and institutions offering ESL.
- impetus for innovations in curriculum and materials development.

Like the Public Service Commission Standards, benchmarks are divided by skill area: listening/speaking, reading and writing. For each skill, there are twelve Benchmark levels, making thirty-six in all.

Each Benchmark describes the competencies the learner should demonstrate at that Benchmark. Each Benchmark includes a general description (i.e. an overall account of the learner's communication ability for that skill). The following example is a general description of Benchmark 6 in listening/speaking (comparable to Level B of the PSC):

General description:

Learner can communicate in less predictable contexts in common daily situations related to needs (within familiar topics but with some unfamiliar vocabulary).

Follows main ideas in simple formal and informal conversations face-to-face, understands and uses everyday vocabulary and a limited number of idioms. May avoid topics (gaps in vocabulary).

Uses a variety of structures. Accuracy may be reduced; grammar and pronunciation errors are frequent and may sometimes impede communication. Discourse is reasonably fluent, of moderate length.

Information content is complex, with detail and requires complex questioning and careful listening.

Discourse and social skills are required for successful communication.

Uses phone on familiar matters.

(Canadian Language Benchmarks: ESL for Adults, p.46)

Each Benchmark also includes (see Table 2) a description of specific areas of language competence for the skill in question described as observable, measurable and teachable behaviours (i.e. “What the person can do”); the minimum performance requirements in terms of effectiveness and quality of the communication (i.e. “Performance conditions”); and constraints on the performance such as time, audience, complexity, length (i.e “Situational conditions”). Sample real life tasks which require the competencies described with performance and situational conditions for this level are also given as examples of what can be accomplished by learners who are at that Benchmark.

Table 2. Listening/Speaking Benchmark 6: Developing competence in intermediate oral communication

What The Person Can Do	Performance Conditions	Situational Conditions
<p>1. Instructions Give spoken instructions.</p>	<p>Gives clear spoken instructions as required. Uses imperatives, statements, requests; gives a sequence of steps in order, uses sequence markers.</p>	<p>Context strongly supports the utterance.</p> <p>Interaction is face to face or on the phone. Speech is slow, context is clear and predictable.</p>
<p>2. Social interaction Apologize, make excuse. Express and respond to disappointment. Accept offer.</p>	<p>Responds appropriately to and initiates apology, excuse. Expresses and responds to disappointment. Accepts offer. (<i>I am sorry about..., not able, cannot, could not, thank you, great, would</i>)</p>	<p>Psychological stress is usually moderate in face to face exchanges (friends, counsellors, teachers, receptionists); learner can partially prepare the exchange.. Phone exchanges with strangers are stressful for the learner.</p>
<p>3. Information Relate a short familiar event. Give information about own educational background. Describe characteristics/strengths required for people in different social roles. Give information and ask for information to make or cancel appointment/express obligation, ability, inability, certainty. Explain what isn't/wasn't known. Indicate problems in communication.</p>	<p>Describes clearly/intelligibly a sequence of events in the past on a topic related to personal life which includes obligation, ability, certainty; explains details. Uses past tense inflection on many familiar verbs, conjunctive links (sequence markers), adverbs of time, frequency and duration, correct simple structures with some omission/reduction of elements (e.g. articles, past tense morphemes). Hypothetical future condition and time clauses appear but are often incorrect. Uses comparative structures and ellipsis. Describes personal characteristics/strengths. Gives and asks information on the phone as required in clear predictable discourse. (<i>Have to able, sure, sorry, I don't know, if, she doesn't like it but he does</i>).</p>	<p>Topics may include health, education, careers and occupations, job search, banking, and other consumer services.</p> <p>* May not know spelling conventions on the phone (e.g “A”as in Alpha, “B”as in Bravo).</p>
<p>4. Suasion (getting things done) Give suggestions/advice. Predict consequences.</p>	<p>Clarifies meaning, paraphrases. (<i>Did you say “...? Can you repeat/explain this? Do you mean ...?”(Should, shouldn't, had better, you can...)</i>)</p>	
<p>Sample tasks:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> · C (Community) 1. Explain how to make/do something properly, give a short set of instructions (i.e. change the light, make soup, register a car). 3. Call to make or cancel a medical appointment. Give information about medical history (e.g. surgery, illness, allergies, medication). Ask and answer questions in a parent/teacher interview. Tell about past experience. · S (Study) 3. Describe a good parent, student, friend, employee, supervisor. Call to report absence, illness. Lead a simple classroom discussion, e.g. on similarities and differences between people, places, jobs, events, etc. · W (Work) 3. Make an appointment for a job interview. Prepare a speech about your personal qualities and work experience for a job interview. 		

(Canadian Language Benchmarks: ESL for Adults, p.47)

These Benchmarks were subsequently used to develop a variety of assessment instruments for various purposes (e.g. placement into government-sponsored ESL courses), local curriculum materials, devices for the certification of learning, and a common language for the entire immigrant-serving community.

The ACTFL Performance Guidelines for K-12

In 1993, four national US language organizations (American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages ACTFL, American Association of the Teachers of French AATF, American Association of the Teachers of German, AATG, American Association of the Teachers of Spanish, AATSP) received funding to develop standards for foreign language education, grades K-12. This was the final subject area to receive federal support to develop national standards as part of the Bush Administration's America 2000 education initiative. An eleven member task force representing a variety of languages, levels of instruction, program models, and geographic regions was appointed to undertake the task of defining content standards - what students should know and be able to do - in foreign language education. At each stage of development, the task force shared its work with the broader profession and the public at large. The resulting document represents an unprecedented consensus among educators, business leaders, government, and the community on the definition and role of foreign language instruction in American education.

In 1999, these generic standards were complemented by nine language-specific standards including French. These standards are very similar to the results of the National Core French Study.

To complement these content standards, ACTFL developed Performance Guidelines for K-12 (November 1999). These guidelines describe "how well" students should be expected to do the "what" of the content standards in order to help language educators understand the developmental path that second language learning takes when it occurs in a school setting. These guidelines (i.e performance standards) represent what students should be able to do with a foreign language after set amounts of time. By referring to the document, teachers should be able to see if their students are performing at a level consistent with the time and effort expended.

The standards and guidelines are divided into three modes of communication (interpersonal, interpretive, and presentational) for five domains of performance:

- comprehensibility (How well is the student understood?)
- comprehension (How well does the student understand?)
- language control (How accurate is the student's language?)
- vocabulary usage (How extensive and applicable is the student's language?)
- communication strategies (How do they maintain communication?)
- cultural awareness (How is their cultural understanding reflected in their communication?)

Developers of the standards viewed the use of language "modes" as a richer and more natural way of envisioning communication than the traditional four skills of listening, speaking, reading and writing by placing emphasis on the context and purpose of the communication rather than

concentrating on any one skill in isolation. Table 3 below compares the NCFS syllabi to the modes of communication and domains of performance used as the organizing principle of the US Standards and ACTFL Guidelines K-12 to illustrate their similarity.

Table 3. Comparison of NCFS Syllabi and US Standards and Performance Guidelines K-12

<i>NCFS syllabi</i>	<i>Domains of Performance</i>	<i>Modes of Communication</i>
<i>communication</i>	<i>comprehensibility</i> (How well are they understood?) <i>comprehension</i> (How well do they understand?)	<i>Interpersonal</i> <i>Presentational</i> <i>Interpersonal</i> <i>Interpretive</i>
<i>culture</i>	<i>cultural awareness</i> (How is their cultural awareness reflected in their communication?)	<i>Interpersonal</i> <i>Interpretive</i> <i>Presentational</i>
<i>general language education</i>	<i>communication strategies</i> (How do they maintain communication?)	<i>Interpersonal</i> <i>Interpretive</i> <i>Presentational</i>
<i>language</i>	<i>language control</i> (How accurate is their language?)	<i>Interpersonal</i> <i>Interpretive</i> <i>Presentational</i>
	<i>vocabulary use</i> (How extensive and applicable is their vocabulary?)	<i>Interpersonal</i> <i>Interpretive</i> <i>Presentational</i>

These modes of communication and domains of performance are used to describe language performance at the three benchmarks/levels: Novice Range, Intermediate Range, and Pre-Advanced-Range. These benchmarks/levels correlate to set amounts of time:

- Novice range correlates to students enrolled in K-Grade 4 or Grade 5-8 or Grade 9-10 programs;
- Intermediate range correlates to students enrolled in K-8, and 7-12 programs; and
- Pre-Advanced correlates to students enrolled in K-12 programs.

The ACTFL Proficiency Guidelines and the Performance Guidelines for K-12 Learners dovetail. The K-12 Performance Guidelines describe language performance of students who learn language within a school setting. As students go beyond the Pre-Advanced range and reach a sustained level of Advanced proficiency, the regular ACTFL Proficiency Guidelines apply. Table 4 presents the performance guidelines for the pre-advanced range learner who has studied the second language from K to grade 12 for comprehensibility (oral communication) in the interpersonal and presentational modes.

PRE-ADVANCED LEARNER Grade K-12	
Comprehensibility	How well are they understood?
Interpersonal	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • narrate and describe using connected sentences and paragraphs in present and other time frames when interacting on topics of personal, school and community interest; • are understood by those with whom they interact, although there may still be a range of linguistic inaccuracies, and on occasion, the communication partner may need to make special effort to understand the message; • use pronunciation and intonation patterns that are understandable to a native speaker unaccustomed to interacting with language learners; • use language confidently and with ease, with few pauses;

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • are able to meet practical writing needs such as letters and summaries by writing descriptions and narrations of paragraph length and organization, showing sustained control of basic structures and partial control of more complex structures and time frames.
Presentational	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • report, narrate and describe, using connected sentences, paragraph-length and longer forms of discourse, in oral and written presentations on topics of personal, school, and community interest; • use pronunciation and intonation patterns that are understood by native users of the language, although the listener/reader may on occasion need to make a special effort to understand the message; • use language confidently and with ease, with few pauses; • communicate with a fairly high degree of facility when making oral and written presentations about familiar and well-researched topics.

Sample from ACTFL Performance Guidelines for K-12 Learners

These standards have been used to develop test specifications for the first National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) of foreign language ability which is scheduled for 2004 and will test Spanish. It is expected to provide insights regarding:

- how long it takes students to achieve proficiency in a language,
- whether or not learning one foreign language accelerates the learning of subsequent languages,
- how much early-start language programs contribute to overall proficiency, and
- related issues.

There will be a minimum of two test versions (a higher and a lower level of difficulty) to accommodate a wide range of experiences with the study of Spanish. Actual testing will involve a targeted system; students will be directed to the appropriate level through self-reporting (proficiency and years of study), school records, teacher recommendation, and a brief questionnaire on vocabulary knowledge.

Since 1969, NAEP has regularly assessed samples of US students. The most frequently assessed subjects are reading writing, mathematics, and science in grades 4, 8, and 12. The NAEP reports describe what students know and can do in various subject areas. This test will provide objective information on student performance only which will be made available to policymakers at the national, state, and local levels. Only group statistics will be reported, no individual student or teacher data will be released.

Concluding Remarks

This article has examined standards and the role they play in test development. An examination of the process of test development for three national tests has illustrated what standards have in common, how they differ, and the reasons for these differences.

In each case standards were developed first as a basis for test development. The process for the development of these standards varied with the purposes for which they were being developed. The Public Service standards were developed internally to meet the needs of a specific context - to determine whether candidates meet second language requirements of bilingual positions. In contrast both the Canadian Language Benchmarks the US standards were developed through a large-scale consensus building project for specific populations. The

Canadian Language Benchmarks were developed for adult immigrants to Canada; the US standards were developed for school-aged learners of foreign languages.

While the PSC standards support a single purpose test, both the Canadian Language Benchmarks and the US Standards have multiple purposes. In the case of the Canadian Language Benchmarks, these include providing a common basis for assessment of both adult ESL learners and ESL institutions across Canada, providing a clear statement of an immigrant's language ability for a variety of stakeholders, encouraging consistency of outcomes for ESL learners across the country, and providing impetus for innovations in ESL curriculum and materials development. In the case of the US Standards, these include encouraging consistency of outcomes for foreign language learners across the country, providing a common basis to evaluate the progress of foreign language education assessment, and providing insights regarding programming differences and the influences of other variables.

In terms of information provided, each of the standards examined is divided into three levels. Each included descriptions of specific areas of language competence, performance requirements and constraints on performance. However, the amount of detail provided varies with the purposes for which they were developed. The PSC standards provide the least detail while the Canadian Language Benchmarks provide the most. The US standards are somewhere in between.

Each of these examples has something in common with a possible FSL test for high school graduates. Although the Public Service Commission Test is for adult candidates for bilingual positions in the public service, it is the only example specific to FSL. The Canadian Language Benchmarks are for adult immigrant ESL learners. They are far more broad-ranging to accommodate a number of purposes which are shared by proponents of an FSL test: the development of a test to assess individual student's linguistic ability and the strengthening language programs across the country. The context and the population targeted by the US Standards are the closest to FSL in Canada. The test targets high school graduates. However, the purpose is not assessing individual language ability but collective ability.

Together, these examples provide insights for the development of a Canadian FSL test for high school graduates.

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