

# **French Second Language Proficiency Test**

**By Alina Macfarlane**

## **Introduction**

This article is the first in a series which will describe CASLT's work to develop a French Second Language proficiency test. This initial article will provide background to the project by outlining the original impetus for this work, the project goals and preliminary findings. Future articles will describe proficiency tests which have been developed for similar purposes in Canada and internationally and the process followed for their development and implementation to introduce next steps.

## **Why an FSL Proficiency Test?**

In November 2001, CASLT received funding from Canadian Heritage for a research project on French Second Language proficiency testing. This project was initiated in response to:

- requests from FSL teachers who wished to strengthen the profile of French in their schools and to motivate students to continue their study of French to high school graduation
- Canadian Parents for French State of FSL Education in Canada 2000 report which underlined the high attrition rates in FSL programs across Canada
- Canadian government initiatives to promote FSL among anglophones to increase the number of bilingual citizens
- a need for a nationally recognized form of assessment to provide a standardized evaluation of students' linguistic ability

## **Project Goals**

In year 1 (2002) of the project, research was undertaken by Helen Coltrinari, past president of CASLT. Coltrinari stated that the original goals of the project were:

- to provide a picture of FSL programs across Canada
- to examine proficiency tests in use in Canada
- to explore proficiency tests that exist outside of Canada
- to suggest possible formats for a proficiency test

I was invited to join the project in January 2003. My role was to build on Coltrinari's work to examine the feasibility of a Canadian FSL proficiency certificate for graduates of high school FSL programs which would be based on a proficiency test.

## **Preliminary Findings**

A national FSL certificate and the proficiency test on which it is based require provincial/territorial agreement concerning test specifications. These are generally based on a curriculum framework which is composed of:

1. content standards (i.e. an analysis of a target language use situations and the performance(s) which the test is intended to predict), and
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).

To determine the extent of existing agreement concerning content standards and performance standards in all provinces and territories, three features of existing FSL programs will be examined in this article. These include:

- program organization,
- organization of curriculum, and
- provincial/territorial tests.

## **How similar are FSL programs?**

Core French programs across Canada are very similar but there are some important differences:

- French is optional in some provinces, mandatory at several grade levels in some provinces and mandatory in all grades in others.
- Students in different provinces/territories can begin learning French at different entry points: kindergarten, grade 1, grade 2, grade 3, grade 4, grade 5, grade 7, grade 10.

With optional implementation, different entry points, and program articulation over differing numbers of years, learning outcomes can be expected to vary. It is unlikely that a student who has studied core French for 4 years will have the same level of proficiency as one who has studied French for 12 or 13 years.

The following table illustrates some of the differences in program organization from one province/territory to another.

Table 1. Synthesis of CF Program Characteristics by Province

	BC	AB	SK	MB	On	QC	NB	NS	PE	NF
CF program articulated over at least 9 years	8 years	X		X	X	X	X	X	X	X
CF compulsory	5-8*	-	-	-	4-9	K-11	1-10	4-9	4-9	4-9
Entry points	K, 4, or 5**	many4**	many7**	K, 1, or 4**	K, 1, or 4**	K or 1**	K or 1**	4**	K, 1 or 4**	K, 1 or 4**
Extended CF					X			X		X
Intensive CF			pilot				pilot	pilot		X
Exit test	X					X	optional	optional		Gr. 11
Existing CF certificate/certification							X			
Immersion certificate/diploma	English and French diploma	subjects in French noted on transcripts	bilingual mention on transcripts for those completing 50% of credits in French.	special diploma indicating courses taken in French	-	-	immersion certificate	immersion certificate	immersion certificate	diplomas/transcripts specify French immersion
Minimum number of hours of instruction to end of grade 12					1040	1300				960

\* any second language, but usually French \*\* usual entry point

### How similar are FSL curricula?

Vandergrift (1995, 1999) compared curricula and outcomes in all provincial/territorial programs of study for core French.

He found that most provinces/territories have adopted the theoretical framework of the National Core French Study as a basis for curriculum development and outcome specification. These provinces include Alberta, Saskatchewan, New Brunswick, Nova Scotia, Prince Edward Island, Newfoundland/Labrador and the Northwest Territories.

He points out that all provinces/territories agree on:

- competencies that a language learner must demonstrate to be considered proficient in French, and
- what needs to be evaluated in order to assess that ability

However, he indicates that while provinces/territories share general outcomes, these outcomes do not state very precisely what students are able to do with their second language skills nor stipulate in definite terms how well students should be able to perform given tasks.

**How similar are provincial FSL tests?**

Not all provinces/territories have official FSL tests (see Table 2). Of those that do, modification to support national use would be required:

- The content of three of these tests (British Columbia, Newfoundland and Québec) is closely tied to the FSL curriculum of the province in question. This may give students of that province an advantage over students from other provinces.
- Rating scales used to score these tests in British Columbia and Newfoundland are province-specific and would need to be standardized for national use. Quebec does not have rating scales at present. Only the New Brunswick test is tied to internationally recognized rating scales - the ACTFL proficiency guidelines.
- The New Brunswick tests has no written component. Core French students may be more successful in other skill areas which this test does not evaluate.
- While the New Brunswick test is suitable for all students (i.e. core French, immersion), the British Columbia and Newfoundland tests are designed specifically for core French students. If these tests were to be used for immersion students, a ceiling effect may result (i.e. all immersion students would have very high scores but the test would not accurately identify their proficiency level).

Table 2. Provincial FSL TESTS

Province	FSL Test
AB	As part of the Edmonton Public Schools’ French Language Renewal Program, a project to adapt the Public Service Commission French Proficiency exam for high school students is underway. The design of the adapted version and initial piloting with 100 students for the written component and 12 students for the oral component took place this year ( <i>for further information see page X in this volume or no further information is available at this time</i> ).
BC	A provincial FSL exam is administered to all grade 12 Core French students. Results of this exam are used for part of the students’ final FSL mark. The exam consists of: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• a linguistic competency component (two cloze passages),</li> <li>• a reading component (Questions and answers may in English or French).</li> <li>• a writing component (a letter or short article and a narration or description) which is marked holistically</li> <li>• an oral component (students are given a card describing a situation must</li> </ul>

	<p>develop a conversation).</p> <p>Includes provincial rating scales.</p> <p>British Columbia also offers an Advanced Placement tests (AP) for French and an International Baccala_____T_____.</p>
MB	-
NB	<p>All grade 12 students enrolled in a French course, are eligible for the French Second Language Oral Proficiency Assessment, a 15-30 minute individual oral interview which is rated according to the criteria of the New Brunswick Oral Proficiency Scale.</p> <p>Specific points on this scale have been tied to goals for core French, late immersion and early immersion programs.</p> <p>There is no written proficiency component</p>
NF	<p>Students in FR3200 (grade 11) are required to take two part examination including</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• a 15-minute oral proficiency interview (marked holistically)</li> <li>• aural and written components based on the content and themes outlined in provincial curriculum which include:</li> <li>• items presented on audio tape (visual association, dictation, and providing answers to written prompts based on an oral text),</li> <li>• language learning strategies in vocabulary use, a modified cloze test, comprehension and opinion questions based on a cultural passage, writing in response to a visual or headline, and writing in response to an item.</li> </ul> <p>Includes provincial rating scales.</p>
NS	In one NS school district, Grade 12 French students are offered the New Brunswick Second Language Oral Proficiency Assessment.
NT	-
NU	-
ON	-
PEI	
QC	<p>Québec's Ministry of Education administers a compulsory high school exit exam. Four language skill areas are tested:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• reading (based on an authentic passage from a newspaper or magazine),</li> <li>• writing (a letter based on a particular situation),</li> <li>• listening (authentic conversations)</li> <li>• speaking (follows the BC model which Québec helped to develop).</li> </ul>

	This is an achievement-based test but a competency-based testing system is being developed (including explicit performance standards) and will be available in 2010. Standardized observation scales are also being created.
SK	-
YK	-

### Concluding Remarks

Although several provincial tests already exist, they reflect curricula and expectations of specific provincial/territorial programs. Without some adaptation, none of these could be adopted for national purposes.

A national FSL certificate and the proficiency test on which it is based require agreement concerning test specifications based on a content standards and performance standards. It is clear that such a framework already partially exists. There is remarkable agreement among the provinces/territories concerning the competencies expected of language learners to demonstrate proficiency in French and what needs to be evaluated in order to assess proficiency (i.e content standards). However, provincial/territorial FSL programs are organized in different ways leading to varying outcomes. What remains to be developed are performance standards to incorporate these differences.

### References

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### About the Author

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