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AUTHOR	Silvestro, John R.; And Others
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ABSTRACT

California has developed a new series of credential examinations for foreign language teachers to make it possible to test the competence of teachers in six languages less frequently taught than Spanish and French. These languages are German, Japanese, Mandarin, Punjabi, Russian, and Vietnamese. Each assessment is based on the specifications designed for previously developed tests for teachers of Spanish and French, and each evaluated cultural and grammatical knowledge. California foreign language educators played a significant role in the development of the six assessments. The proposed specifications called for assessing proficiency in speaking, listening, reading, and writing and knowledge of general linguistics concepts and the target culture. Proposed specifications were reviewed and test items were developed. The reviewed items were field tested, and test forms were prepared after holistic scoring of field tests. Additional content reviews were then undertaken to prepare final versions that provide comprehensive assessment of teacher knowledge and skills. An appendix presents general test specifications for the six tests. (SLD)

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Innovations in Foreign Language Educator Assessment in California

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John R. Silvestro

Stephen I. Weiss

National Evaluation Systems, Inc.™

and

Terence C. Janicki

California Commission on Teacher Credentialing

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Innovations in Foreign Language Educator Assessment in California

Introduction

Over the past twenty years, California has become not only the most populous state in the nation, but also the most diverse. Drawn by its natural beauty, its climate, and its economic opportunities, millions of immigrants from Asia, Europe, and Latin America have transformed California into a multiethnic, multicultural, and multilingual society. One result of this profound demographic transformation is the substantial proportion of students in California public schools whose primary language is other than English, a phenomenon that has led to the development of wide-ranging English-as-a-Second-Language and bilingual education programs. Another result is the variety of foreign language instruction that is offered in California schools.

Given its linguistic diversity, the breadth of foreign language instruction that is part of the public school curriculum, and the state's commitment to teaching excellence, California is in a unique position to explore new ways of measuring whether prospective teachers have the knowledge and skills necessary to function effectively in foreign language classrooms. The new series of credential examinations for foreign language teachers developed by the California Commission on Teacher Certification have provided a comprehensive and integrated solution to this challenge.

Program Context

Teachers seeking the California single subjects teaching credential for foreign languages may obtain this credential in essentially one of two ways: by completing an approved teacher preparation program in the language of emphasis at a California college or university; or by taking and passing a subject matter examination in the language of emphasis. While the number of approved California teacher preparation programs in the more commonly taught languages such as Spanish and French may be relatively large, there are few, if any, approved teacher preparation programs in the less commonly taught languages such as German, Japanese, Mandarin, Punjabi, Russian, and Vietnamese. Given this situation, the California Commission on Teacher Credentialing (CCTC), contracted with National Evaluation Systems, Inc. (NES®) to develop and administer subject matter credential examinations for foreign language teachers for the six previously identified languages, as part of the new Single Subject Assessments for Teaching (SSAT™) program.

Three years before NES's involvement in the development of these six assessments, the CCTC, working with a panel of California public school language teachers and foreign language teacher preparation faculty, had prepared a set of test specifications for teachers of languages other than English. These test specifications were designed to assess candidates seeking a credential to teach French or Spanish. They were also written from the perspective of a complex assessment paradigm that called for three separate tests including a multiple-choice examination of linguistics, literature, comprehension of written and spoken language, and knowledge of culture; and two separate performance assessments for assessing speaking skills and linguistic, literary, and cultural analysis.

As part of the changes in state and national best practices in foreign language teacher preparation that emerged after the development of these earlier test specifications, the CCTC had received a clear message in its interactions with California foreign language educators that a single credential examination that combined all of the relevant knowledge and skill domains would be preferable to the three-examination model. A single examination would facilitate candidate registration and also reduce total examinee fees, since the entire assessment requirement could be completed in a single test session. Also, these same educators called for assessments that reflected the intent of the recently released *Final Report of the National Standards in Foreign Language Education Project*, with its substantial proficiency-based emphasis. Thus, NES worked with the CCTC to develop foreign language credentialing examinations in German, Japanese, Mandarin, Punjabi, Russian, and Vietnamese that were customized to meet the requests of California foreign language teachers and teacher educators.

CCTC Requirements for Assessments

Based upon the input of California foreign language educators, the CCTC called for six foreign language subject matter assessments. Each assessment would:

- be based on modified foreign language test specifications (slightly different from the original test specifications developed for French and Spanish) that could be applied to varied and multiple languages;
- provide significant evaluation of both cultural and grammatical knowledge;

- provide for ample opportunities to demonstrate language proficiency;
- identify the most salient traditional and contemporary cultural knowledge needed by entry-level teachers of each language;
- create authentic tasks that were culturally and linguistically appropriate for diverse languages; and
- provide for performance-based listening and reading assessments.

Test Development Process

California educator involvement. California foreign language educators played a substantial role in the development of the six foreign language teacher credential assessments. With the assistance of the CCTC and the California Foreign Language Teachers Association (CFLTA), assessment advisory panels of up to eight California public school teachers and college teacher preparation faculty were appointed for each language. Panelists were all experienced educators and had been identified as being active in state and/or national foreign language education activities. The CFLTA provided valuable input on California and national trends in foreign language instruction, particularly on some of the unique issues of some of the less commonly taught languages.

Reference materials and ancillary services. Working with the CCTC, National Evaluation Systems assembled an extensive library of foreign language instruction and assessment materials, including a number of curriculum documents from the California Department of Education, the CFLTA, the American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages (ACTFL), and the National Standards in Foreign Languages Education Report.

Development of test specifications. The development of test specifications for the six languages was an iterative process that drew on the previously developed and CCTC-approved French and Spanish test specifications, but also took into account the special challenges posed by these six diverse languages.

This process involved review of state and national foreign language standards and curricula, as well as extensive consultation with foreign language educators in California. Drawing on these sources, test development staff first prepared preliminary outlines of test domains, including examples of content and skills that would be measured within those domains. Following review of this draft test framework by language education experts, test development specialists prepared detailed test specifications featuring a description of assessment components, sample selected- and constructed-response items, and sample performance characteristics on which scoring scales would ultimately be constructed.

The proposed test specifications called for assessing proficiency in the communicative skills of speaking, listening, reading, and writing; knowledge of general linguistics concepts, including the process of language acquisition and knowledge of the linguistics of the target language; and knowledge of the target culture. These proficiency and content-knowledge domains were expanded into major topics under two broad headings: *Knowledge of Language and Culture* and *Language Proficiency*. A complete set of the test specifications is provided in Appendix A.

Assessment methods. Among the proposed assessment methods were the following:

- selected-response items to assess knowledge of culture, general linguistics, and target-language-specific linguistics;
- a performance-based language structures task that requires the candidate to complete, transform, and correct sentences in the target language;
- a performance-based listening comprehension assessment in response to target language speech, one recorded sample of informal target language (e.g., a brief dialogue among friends), and one recorded sample of relatively formal target language speech (e.g., an excerpt from a lecture or radio broadcast);
- a performance-based reading comprehension assessment of two different passages, one sample from a work of literature, the other from a nonliterary source;
- a performance-based written expression assessment, in which the candidate produces two well-organized compositions in response to prompts describing different writing tasks (e.g., a memorandum, a letter, a short essay); and
- a performance-based oral expression assessment, in which two speaking prompts are presented in written form and are also read aloud on tape, with the candidate required to speak on tape in the target language for up to two minutes for each prompt.

Correlation study. When the test specifications were close to final, they were correlated with the California Standards of Quality and Effectiveness for Teacher Preparation in Languages Other than English, a set of standards for teacher preparation of language teachers that had been drafted by California foreign language educators. The results of this correlation study, which were confirmed by California foreign language educator reviewers, suggested that the proposed test specifications and assessment descriptions provided substantial coverage for all of the nine Standards of Quality and Effectiveness.

Test specifications review conference. The assessment advisory panels representing the six languages were convened for a two-day meeting to review the draft test specifications and sample test items for each assessment domain. Through a series of cross-language general orientation and training sessions combined with review and discussions of issues unique to each language, a set of test specifications was approved by all six assessment advisory panels. This set of test specifications was supplemented by language-specific notes, through which each language panel provided special instructions to the CCTC and to the assessment contractor (e.g., the recommended age, gender, and dialect of recorded speakers on the audio tapes for the listening comprehension section of the test; the use of diacritical marks for written materials; and the preferred typeface for written materials in the target language).

Test item development. Following the test specifications review conference, the draft test items and performance assessments were developed to match the California-approved test specifications. Throughout the item development process, members of the six California assessment advisory panels were contacted to obtain their feedback on draft test materials and their suggestions for enhancing those materials. After draft item banks were prepared, the banks were reviewed by the contractor's Equity Advisory Board, a group of educators who have experience with issues of bias and diversity. The banks were then reviewed by content experts in each of the six languages who had not been previously involved in item development activities.

Item review conference. The six assessment advisory panels were then reconvened for a two-day item review conference. Each selected-response and performance assessment was reviewed. If necessary, items were revised, or in some cases deleted, based on the consensus decisions of the panels. Following this conference, the banks were put into final form based on the panel revisions.

Field testing. Each of the panel-approved performance assessments was field tested with teacher preparation candidates who were judged to possess at least moderate target language proficiency (e.g., raised in a household in which the target language was spoken on a regular basis, had spent at least six months living in the target language culture, had completed an academic degree or a minor in the target language).

The field test responses were scored by California educators who were public school or college teachers of the respective target language. Three to four scorers trained in the methods of focused holistic scoring participated in the scoring of each language. A four-point holistic scoring scale was used to score the field test responses. Across the six languages there was high scorer agreement on the holistic ratings assigned to each written and oral response. Marker responses for each language—a set of responses clearly demonstrating the holistic score points of "1", "2", "3", and "4"— were identified by the scorers for each performance assessment. These would be used to assist in training scorers following future operational test administrations.

Item validation/standard setting. Test forms were prepared following the completion of holistic scoring of field test responses. Test forms were prepared for each of the six language fields according to test blueprints that were approved by the CCTC and by representatives of each language advisory panel.

Every test form consisted of written and audio portions, each component raising unique issues and requiring its own creative solutions. Large blocks of language text that formed the basis of several types of constructed-response assessments were input directly into an electronic test bank. Meanwhile, language-specific "fragments"—individual words, phrases, or sentences—were computer scanned and electronically merged into the appropriate selected-response item. Simultaneously, NES recruited two native speakers in each target language for the listening sections' audiotaped stimuli. The speakers reviewed the committee-approved scripts prior to recording, then worked in pairs to address and resolve any issues that arose during the recording session. Once the written and audio portions of the test banks were complete, individual test forms were created and reviewed once more by language experts to assure that no error had been introduced during the test bank conversion process.

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Once test forms and ancillary materials had been produced, assessment advisory panel members for all six languages were convened for an item validation/standard setting conference. During this meeting the following activities were completed:

- Each item in the test item bank was independently validated for its match with the intended test specification, accuracy, freedom from bias, and job-relatedness.
- Using both individual and group iterative procedures, minimum passing scores were recommended for each of the tests.
- The holistic scoring scale for each type of performance assessment was reviewed and approved by each panel.
- Marker responses, obtained from the field test for each of the five holistically scored performance assessments, were reviewed and approved.

The CCTC later approved all of the panel-recommended minimum passing scores.

Prepare for and administer tests at first operational administration. Following the item validation/standard setting conference, any panel-identified editorial revisions were made to the test forms, additional content expert reviews were undertaken, and the test forms and audiotapes were copied. Following the first test administration, multiple-choice item statistics were reviewed. Concurrently, the performance assessments were scored using focused holistic scoring procedures. The multiple-choice and performance assessment domain scores for individual examinees were then combined based on CCTC-approved weighting formulas, and score reports were distributed to examinees, teacher preparation colleges and universities, and to the CCTC.

Summary

At the end of the twentieth century, California is leading the way toward the multicultural society of the future. Faced with the challenge of developing a comprehensive series of assessments to effectively measure the knowledge and skills of prospective foreign language teachers in multiple target languages, the California Commission on Teacher Credentialing and its assessment contractor, National Evaluation Systems, created rigorous examinations utilizing sophisticated selected-response items and authentic, performance-based tasks in an integrated assessment of linguistic and grammatical knowledge, cultural understanding, and language proficiency. The complex, iterative test development process drew on the most contemporary formulations of foreign language instruction standards and relied on the expertise of California foreign language educators at each stage of test development, administration, and scoring. The result was a comprehensive assessment of prospective foreign language teachers grounded in the necessary knowledge and skills identified by California educators, sensitive to the cultural and linguistic characteristics of each target language, yet adaptable for effective use with multiple languages.

APPENDIX A

Test Specifications

SINGLE SUBJECT ASSESSMENTS FOR TEACHING
TEST SPECIFICATIONS

Field 19: Mandarin
Field 20: German
Field 21: Japanese
Field 22: Russian
Field 23: Punjabi
Field 24: Vietnamese

CULTURAL KNOWLEDGE

In this section of the assessment, the candidate responds to multiple-choice questions that may address, but are not limited to, the following topics.

- Physical and cultural geography.
- Contemporary and historical social structures, and cultural issues, including, but not limited to: political, religious, and economic systems and institutions; social classes; education; family and kinship; social customs; work and leisure patterns; language.
- Classical and contemporary literary works and oral traditions.
- Individual variations within the cultures represented by the people who speak the language.
- Classical and folk arts.
- Crosscultural comparisons.

LINGUISTICS

In this section of the assessment, the candidate responds to multiple-choice questions that address both knowledge of general linguistics and language-specific linguistics.

A. General Linguistics

This section of the assessment contains multiple-choice questions that require the candidate to demonstrate his/her knowledge of the nature of language, its acquisition, and its use. Items may address, but are not limited to, the following topics.

- Nature of language, its purposes, uses and misuses, and relation to ways of life.
- The significance of language changes and variations that occur within the contexts of time, place, age, gender, and situation.
- Theories of language acquisition and learning.
- The communication process, with the use of strategies such as pragmatics, discourse analysis, and turn-taking and other conversation conventions; proxemics and kinesis; idioms and humor; debate and negotiations; as well as suasive and hortatory modes.

B. Language-Specific Linguistics

This section of the assessment contains multiple-choice questions that require the candidate to demonstrate his/her knowledge of linguistic components of the target language. Items may address, but are not limited to, the following topics.

- Basic linguistic and paralinguistic components of the language: phonology, morphology, syntax, lexicon, semantics, suprasegmentals, kinesis, proxemics, grammar and words (meaning and usage).
- Use of language components in authentic communication contexts.
- Error analysis and its role in the language learning process.

- Principles of contrastive analysis.
- Dialectal differences, their origins, social implications, and ways to address these differences positively.

LANGUAGE STRUCTURES ASSESSMENT

In this section of the assessment, the candidate is presented with scorable tasks that require the candidate to complete, transform, and correct sentences in the target language. Tasks for each skill are embedded in a sample of connected discourse consisting of one or more sentences. The candidate is required to apply knowledge of grammar, syntax, and lexicon to achieve clarity, accuracy, and appropriateness of expression.

LISTENING ASSESSMENT

The candidate is presented with two performance assessments, each based on a recorded sample of speech. One sample is relatively informal (e.g., a brief dialogue overheard on the street), the other relatively formal (e.g., an excerpt from a lecture or radio broadcast). For each sample, the candidate is asked a question testing literal and inferential comprehension of the recorded material, then responds in writing to a series of interrelated questions. The candidate needs to demonstrate the ability to make auditory discriminations (e.g., verb tenses), recognize vocabulary, understand content, and display cultural awareness.

READING ASSESSMENT

The candidate is presented with two performance assessments, each based on a passage of text. One sample is from a work of literature, the other from a nonliterary source (e.g., a newspaper story, a magazine article, a personal letter). For each text, candidates write an answer to a question testing literal and inferential comprehension of the material. The question on the literary excerpt may address cultural characteristics and references, style, and use of literary devices.

WRITING ASSESSMENT

The candidate is required to produce two well-organized compositions in the target language in response to two prompts describing different writing tasks (e.g., a memorandum, a letter, a short essay). The candidate needs to demonstrate the ability to communicate in an appropriate register, using a range of vocabulary, idiomatic expressions, and simple and complex linguistic structures, and to display an appropriate level of cultural knowledge and sensitivity.

SPEAKING ASSESSMENT

Two prompts, presented in written form in the test booklet and also read aloud on tape, require the candidate to speak on tape for up to two minutes in the target language. Both prompts represent tasks classified as advanced according to ACTFL standards (e.g., narrating in past time, hypothesizing on a personal topic). The candidate needs to demonstrate the ability to communicate effectively, using an appropriate range of vocabulary, idiomatic expressions, and simple and complex language structures, displaying an appropriate level of cultural knowledge and understanding.