

Language Testing

What, How and Why

People/Performance Management:

Employees perceive a relative lack of discussion with supervisors around results expected. There is an identified need for improvement in helping employees determine learning needs, in assessing work against objectives, and providing more on-the-job coaching to improve performance.

Career Development: There is a perceived lack of support in employee career development, from both a supervisory and Departmental perspective. Employees also indicated a lower level of satisfaction with their careers in the Public Service.

These results confirm the findings we made through the Performance Measurement Initiative of the trade promotion function of the Department and through the extensive consultations conducted earlier this year by the Champions, as part of the implementation of our Human Resources Strategy.

Assistant deputy ministers and directors general have initiated dialogue at the work unit level to address issues of concern to employees, as they relate to their immediate work environment. At the corporate level, an action plan is under consideration by the Executive Committee, outlining specific deliverables (objectives) in the field of Human Resources for the next three years. These actions respond to concerns expressed by employees and managers.

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Most of the questions you've ever had about language testing are answered in the following article by Claude Alschuler, Chief, Language Testing Unit. Nawal Moussa is the testing assistant and Bahia Abboudy is the office administrator.

What do we test?

The Testing Unit of the Centre for Language Training (CFSL) located at the Bisson campus of the Canadian Foreign Service Institute administers oral proficiency tests in 42 languages. Reading skills are also assessed in nine languages: Arabic, Mandarin, Japanese, Korean, German, Russian, Italian, Spanish, Portuguese. Individuals who need to have their written proficiency assessed can contact the Testing Unit where a test tailor-made for their particular needs in any of the 42 languages will be created.

How do we test?

The Unit administers two types of proficiency tests.

The *Foreign Service Institute Proficiency Test (the FSI test)* is a work-related performance test administered by two native speakers in a face-to-face interview. It is the "official" DFAIT test in that the results are used for a variety of purposes described below.

The SIPT test is a tape-mediated test administered in a language laboratory. It focuses on survival skills in the language. Test results are used to assess the individual's proficiency before and after pre-posting social integration courses (pre- and post tests).

For both tests, the examinees receive a detailed feedback report highlighting their strengths and weaknesses with regard to a set of proficiency descriptors and level definitions. Both tests assess proficiency, that is, how an individual **uses** the language in an authentic situation.



The foreign languages test team: From left to right: Nawal Moussa, Claude-Sylvie Alschuler et Bahia Abboudy.

Why do we test?

Proficiency information is used to meet a variety of departmental needs: recruiting and assignment, establishing benchmarks for proficiency levels at the various missions, determining and forecasting training time frames and assessing related costs, assessing the Department's language resource base and the average level of proficiency at DFAIT. A survey done by the Testing Unit in 1997-98 shows that the average proficiency level at DFAIT is Level 2 (Working Proficiency).

On the pedagogical side, proficiency information is often used by language advisors and teachers to make placement decisions, i.e. group or re-group students of similar ability in order to meet the students' needs and learning curve. Testing also has a positive "washback" effect on curricular and teaching practices in that it helps focus attention on language functions and the communicative aspect of language. Testing is thus an integral part of a systems approach where all the parts are working together toward a common goal.