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French proficiency at the secondary and post-secondary levels

Kirsten Wienckowski

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French proficiency at the secondary and post-secondary levels

Abstract

As a general rule, it is claimed that the four years of foreign language courses taken in high school are equivalent to the first four semesters of foreign courses taken at the university level. In fact, most universities grant college credit for scoring well on the foreign language Advanced Placement (AP) and International Baccalaureate (IB) exams taken by students following the completion of their study of a foreign language in high school. This claim prompts an exploration of proficiency levels achieved by students studying French at the secondary and post-secondary levels through evaluations of the French AP, IB, College Level Examination Program (CLEP), Michigan Test for Teacher Certification (MTTC), and Praxis curricula guidelines, exams, and score descriptions. The proficiency levels are based on the American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages (ACTFL) guidelines.

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First Advisor

Genevieve Peden

Second Advisor

Motoko Tabuse

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FRENCH PROFICIENCY AT THE SECONDARY AND POST-SECONDARY
LEVELS

By

Kirsten Wienckowski

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Introduction

Many claim that the four years of foreign language courses taken at the secondary level are equivalent to the first four semesters or the first two years of foreign language courses taken at the post-secondary level. This may sound reasonable; however, this statement is very general and its validity is questionable. However, this claim does provide the basis for an interesting investigation into foreign language acquisition at the secondary and post-secondary levels.

One must first consider what is meant by equivalent as this could be interpreted in a number of different ways. Equivalency between foreign language courses could mean that the same course material or educational input is being taught at both the secondary and post-secondary levels. This could also mean that students at both levels are taught for the same number of instructional hours. However, for the purposes of this investigation, equivalency between language courses will be determined by the level of proficiency attained by students in the target language.

In order to further narrow this investigation, French will be the only foreign language considered.

Representative of French courses taken at the secondary level, the educational input necessary to succeed on Advanced Placement, International Baccalaureate, and College-Level Educational Program exams will be evaluated to determine the proficiency levels attained by high school students following four years of French study.

Representative of French courses taken at the post-secondary level, the Praxis French: World Language exam and Michigan Test for Teacher Certification in French will be evaluated to determine the proficiency levels attained by university students studying French.

Background Information

In order to evaluate language proficiency, there must be a set of guidelines that outline what aspects of language should be evaluated and to what degree. In the realm of foreign language acquisition, in the United States, the most common set of standards and guidelines for determining language proficiency are those written by the American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages (ACTFL). The ACTFL standards for proficiency provide standards against which all foreign language learners' abilities may be evaluated, making them very useful as they will be a basis for comparison among a variety of foreign language learners from different backgrounds in regards to their experience learning a foreign language; however, it is important to note that these standards do not necessarily "describe the current status of foreign language education in [the United States]," nor do they "describe what is being attained by the majority of foreign language students" (Standards for Foreign Language Learning). It should also be understood that the standards are a curriculum guide; they do not depict specific course content or provide recommendations for the sequence in which material should be covered: they simply provide suggestions of curricular experiences that students should have in order for them to succeed in attaining high levels of proficiency (Standards for Foreign Language Learning). Finally, for those unfamiliar with the ACTFL Standards, they are comparable to the four strands of the Common Core State Standards for English Language Arts (ELA) and Literacy in History/Social Studies, Science, and Technical Subject: Reading, Writing, Speaking and Listening, and Language (Alignment of the National Standards for Learning Languages with the Common Core State Standards).

First, it is important to distinguish between performance and proficiency as they can often be confused in a classroom setting. Language performance is the direct "result of explicit

instruction in an instructional setting,” generally a classroom (ACTFL Performance Descriptors for Language Learners). Performance is a student’s ability to use the language based on what they have learned or practiced in the classroom in familiar contexts with guidance from instructional materials: the student’s ability to demonstrate what they have learned using the vocabulary and functions of language they have been taught in the content areas that have been studied. Proficiency is a student’s ability to use their language skills spontaneously, outside of the classroom, in real world situations where they have not rehearsed. Students are expected to be able to demonstrate their language skills regardless of how they acquired them. To be proficient, the student must also conduct his or herself in a similar manner to that of native speakers of the language. Proficiency and performance are related in that often a student’s results on an assessment evaluating performance may indicate or give a general idea of their proficiency level. The main difference between performance and proficiency levels is that to be at a specific proficiency level, a student must consistently exhibit and fulfill all criteria for that level, while a student needs only to fulfill the criteria for a given performance level most of the time to be considered at that level of performance. (ACTFL Performance Descriptors for Language Learners)

Levels of performance and proficiency are split into three categories: novice, intermediate, and advanced. These ranges are then each divided into low, mid, and high. The range in which a student is placed indicates their listening, speaking, reading, and writing abilities in the target language. In order to assess these abilities, the guidelines focus on the three modes of communication; interpersonal, interpretive, and presentational. (ACTFL Performance Descriptors for Language Learners)

Whenever someone begins learning something new, there are always a variety of influences that determine their success in knowledge acquisition. In the case of second language acquisition, here are many of the factors that influence one's ability to acquire the skills necessary to effectively communicate in a new language and achieve optimal levels of performance and proficiency in the target language: the age at which one learns the language as age and cognitive development of language learners impact the rate of language acquisition; where one learns the language; how one learns a language, either through standard instruction or an immersion program; the learning styles that best suit the learner and whether they are taught through explicit instruction or authentic experiences using the language; and one's motivation for learning a second language, be it extrinsic factors such as grades or requirements or intrinsic factors such as a personal desire to learn the language due to heritage or intended uses of the language (ACTFL Performance Descriptors for Language Learners).

There has long been a discussion among researchers of second language acquisition on the topic of age and how it effects one's ability to attain high proficiency levels in the target language. As a general rule, it is suggested that the younger one begins learning a second language, the better as many researchers believe that as a result of losses of neural plasticity due to brain maturation, many lose the ability to effectively acquire all of the necessary phonological, morphological, and syntactic skills pertinent to second language acquisition. Some suggest that in order to attain native-like phonological abilities, most individuals must begin studying the second language by the age of six. In fact, some researchers believe that for anyone beginning beyond the age of twelve, native-like phonological abilities are unattainable. However, it is believed that native-like morphology and syntax are attainable for those beginning up to the age of fifteen. These ages, while they may vary from one researcher's hypothesis to the next's, are

the basic construct of the critical period for second language acquisition. However, there are counterexamples which disprove the critical period hypothesis: some individuals are able to attain native-like proficiency in some or all areas of communication in their second language. It is common for the native language of these individuals to be similar to their target language; although, that is not always the case. There is some controversy surrounding these counterexamples as their validity has been questioned: some researchers argue, for example, that the choice of subjects in studies seeking to disprove the critical period hypothesis is inappropriate or that the results of assessments used in these studies may be skewed as markedly non-native samples interspersed with the near-native samples often make the near-native samples sound more convincingly native. These counterexamples do give some insight into other factors influencing second language acquisition: for so long, the conversation has revolved predominantly around age, but there are other elements at work. (Bongaerts)

Ideally, all those who learn another language would do so in an immersion setting as this is arguably the most effective means of language acquisition: there is no better way to learn a language than to be completely surrounded by it with no other option but to communicate in the target language. However, for many, this type of second language acquisition is not possible. In the United States, people are taught a foreign language most commonly in a classroom setting through traditional instruction. For the majority of teachers and administrators who teach or deal with foreign language acquisition, one of the most frequently asked questions is how many hours of instruction will it take for students to reach the desired level of fluency? In an immersion setting, after eight weeks or two hundred forty hours of instruction, a student generally reaches Intermediate Low or Intermediate Mid proficiency levels; after sixteen weeks or four hundred eighty hours of instruction, a student generally reaches Intermediate High, Advanced Low, or

Advanced Mid proficiency levels; and after twenty-four weeks or seven hundred twenty hours of instruction, a student generally reaches Advanced Mid, Advanced High, or Superior levels of Proficiency (How Long Does It Take to Become Proficient?). However, in a traditional high school setting, researchers found that the number of hours required to attain Intermediate Mid to Intermediate High proficiency is often extremely underestimated by teachers and parents, and it far exceeds the number of hours required to attain this level of proficiency in an immersion setting.

In one study done by the Center for Applied Second Language Studies (CASLS) at the University of Oregon, researchers evaluated reading scores for seven thousand, five hundred fifteen students of whom six thousand, eight hundred ninety-five had also taken the writing portion of the Standards-based Measurement of Proficiency (STAMP), a test developed by CASLS, and six thousand, two hundred sixty-five had taken the speaking portion. The students whose scores were evaluated were enrolled in three hundred twenty-four classes situated in one hundred seventeen schools in fifty-six districts and twenty-one states. This sample, despite being taken out of convenience, arguably provides a sample representative of students studying a second language and taking these exams across the United States. The number of hours needed to reach a specific proficiency level obviously varies from one student to the next; however, research showed that only about fifteen percent of students reach a proficiency level near Intermediate Mid following approximately seven hundred twenty hours of study, which is equal to the average number of hours of students study a foreign language over four years in a typical high school program (How Many Hours of Instruction Do Students Need to Reach Intermediate-High Proficiency?). These results may come as a surprise to parents, teachers, administrators, and others who believe fourth year language classes to be considered advanced. While there is

evidence of students acquiring Intermediate Mid or Intermediate High proficiency, the majority of students do not: the majority of students acquire minimal proficiency with abilities limited to describing things in their environment, ordering at a restaurant, asking basic questions, or telling a simple story (How Many Hours of Instruction Do Students Need to Reach Intermediate-High Proficiency?).

The previous study then leaves the question: what level of proficiency are students in a traditional high school setting acquiring? In another study done by CASLS at the University of Oregon, researchers took the results of students of French, Spanish, German, Japanese, and Chinese with reading scores for sixteen thousand, five hundred fifty-six students, writing scores for fourteen thousand, three hundred thirty students, and speaking scores for twelve thousand, nine hundred eight students again all coming from the STAMP assessment. They found that most students who study a foreign language “in a traditional high school program reach... the ATFL levels Novice High and Intermediate Low” (What Proficiency Level Do High School Students Achieve?).

This information leads to the other misconception that many parents, teachers, and administrators may have in regard to proficiency levels achieved following four years of foreign language acquisition in high school: it is often incorrectly believed that students will attain the same level of proficiency following the four years of foreign language acquisition in high school as they would following the first four semesters or first two years of foreign language acquisition at the post-secondary level. This question was the topic of another report by CASLS at the University of Oregon. When approaching this question, the first issue to be addressed was what the basis of comparison would be between K-12 and university students: the more traditional approach being to examine educational input which can be measured quantitatively based on

hours of instruction and qualitatively based on curricula, the content of the programs; however, the pitfall to analyzing and basing comparisons solely on input is the fact that this will not give any insight into the students' actual abilities and how well they will perform a linguistic task. This insight is considered the learning outcomes which are generally measured using tests and the ACTFL scale. So, researchers analyzed data collected from the scores of eleven thousand, four hundred sixty-five students with the following distribution in order to assess the learning outcomes: “[three thousand, three hundred fifty-two] eighth grade students attending [one hundred seventeen] schools in [seventy-one] districts and [twenty-four] states, [six thousand, six hundred fifteen] high school students attending [two hundred ten] schools in [one hundred sixteen] districts and [twenty-seven] states, and [one thousand, four hundred ninety-eight] college/university students attending [fifty-six] schools in [twenty-six] states” (How Do Proficiency Levels Compare Between K-12 and University Students?).

In regard to commonly taught languages such as French, Spanish, German, curricula has become standardized meaning that across the U.S., similar content is being taught in these language courses for approximately the same number of instructional hours. Researchers found that in general, high school students with three years of study will have the same proficiency levels as university students with one year of study. This essentially disproves the commonly held hypothesis as it takes three years of study at the secondary level to equate to one at the post-secondary level, and it is not likely that the second year of study at the university level will be comparable to the fourth year of study in a traditional high school setting. However, there are confounding variables that will influence the proficiency levels students reach, including the following: some high school and university students may perform better as a result of previous language instruction in elementary or middle school, high school and university students in their

third or fourth year of second language acquisition are often those who enjoy the language and are more likely to put time and effort into the study of the target language outside of the classroom, and then there are students, particularly at the university level who have studied abroad. (How Do Proficiency Levels Compare Between K-12 and University Students?)

Language instruction in elementary school or middle school, prior to foreign language instruction in a high school setting, has been proven to have a fairly large influence on language acquisition at the secondary level. Researchers found that beginning language study before high school leads to large increases in the number of students who can use the language for basic oral and written communication. It was determined that students who begin in elementary school, in non-immersion programs such as Foreign Language in the Elementary School (FLES), are about seventy percent more likely to reach levels of basic communication, while students who begin in middle school are about fifty percent more likely. Interestingly, it was also determined that beginning in elementary rather than middle school does not seem to matter in terms of literacy skills, but there may be a small benefit in terms of speaking abilities. The large percentages of increased proficiency levels in high school due to previous language instruction suggest that the same phenomenon is likely to apply to university students who previously studied their target language in a high school setting. (Do Early Language Programs Improve High School Proficiency?)

Language Acquisition at the Secondary Level

In the United States, nationwide standards are followed and used as curriculum guidelines provide suggestions for the level of knowledge students should have in a given subject area at each grade level. There is, as one would suspect, some variation in the way in which these standards are interpreted by each state, and within a state, there may be differences in curriculum

from one school district to the next; however, this standardization allows generalizations to be made about French language acquisition at the secondary level. Standardization means that educational input in terms of the number of hours students spend in the classroom studying French and the material students are learning is comparable across the country.

In terms of the curriculum for world languages, there are two sets of standards that may be applied: the Common Core State Standards (CCSS) and the ACTFL National Standards for Learning Languages. There are no CCSS that specifically address foreign language acquisition; however, the CCSS for English Language Arts (ELA) and Literacy in History/Social Studies, Science, and Technical Subjects, are very similar to the ACTFL National Standards for Learning Languages. The Common Core areas of Reading, Writing, Speaking, and Listening align closely with the National Standards area of Communication which is broken down into Interpersonal communication which includes speaking, listening or writing, and reading; Interpretive communication which includes reading, listening, and viewing; and presentational communication which includes writing, speaking, and visually representing. The key ideas and details provided for each of the standards were proven to be very similar based on a study done by ACTFL. This similarity means that assessing proficiency levels based on the ACTFL proficiency guidelines for both CCSS and the ACTFL National Standards for Language Learners would most likely yield the same results. Thus, whether a school's French curriculum was built based on CCSS or the ACTFL National Standards for Language Learners will not be a factor that influences a student's French language acquisition. (ACTFL National Standards for Learning Languages)

Throughout the nation, high school students studying French take Advanced Placement (AP), International Baccalaureate (IB), and College-Level Examination Program (CLEP) exams

at the end of their senior year in order to assess their French language proficiency. These exam scores are commonly sent to universities where credit may be given to students providing they performed sufficiently well on the exam. In addition, while most universities use their own placement tests to assess French proficiency and place students into the appropriate course, these AP, IB, and CLEP exam scores provide some indication of the level at which a student will likely be placed. These qualities make the curriculum and scoring guidelines for these exams optimal examples of French curricula at the secondary level; however, in the case of both AP and IB, it should be noted that the curricula is advanced with higher expectations for the students. For the purpose of being able to effectively compare the proficiency levels achieved by students who take these exams, the scores on these exams will be evaluated against the NCSSFL-ACTFL Can-Do Statements which essentially provides a check-list for foreign language learners and instructors alike as it presents a list of can-do statements that can be used to evaluate a foreign language learner's ability and proficiency level in the following categories which are defined by the National Standards for 21st Century Language Learning: Interpersonal Communication, Presentational Speaking, Presentational Writing, Interpretive Listening, and Interpretive Reading (NCSSFL-ACTFL Can-Do Statements).

Advanced Placement

The AP French Language and Culture Curriculum is a detailed guide that thoroughly outlines what will be expected of students taking the AP French exam. This guide is beneficial for instructors of AP French, providing them with a detailed description of exactly what they must teach their students to ensure their success on the AP French exam, and for students as it gives them something to check themselves against and includes sample AP French questions. Much like the ACTFL National Standards for Language Learners and the CCSS, the AP French

curriculum is focused on the three modes of communication: interpersonal, interpretive, and presentational. Interestingly, the aim of the course is not to overemphasize grammatical correctness, particularly not at the expense of communication; rather, the focus of the AP French course is to promote fluency and accuracy in language use in order to optimize communication. Thus, the ability to communicate effectively in French is valued above all else, but this is not to say that grammar is invaluable as poor grammatical abilities will decrease the effectiveness of communication. (AP French Language and Culture Curriculum Framework)

On the AP French exam, students are given the opportunity to demonstrate their prowess in the three types of communication. This curriculum guide includes six groups of learning objectives and achievement level descriptions which provide a description of what a student should know and be capable of across the three communication modes in order to perform well on the AP French exam. These six groups are spoken interpersonal communication; written interpersonal communication; audio, visual, and audiovisual interpretive communication; written and print interpretive communication; spoken presentational communication; and written presentational communication. Students' abilities in each of these areas is assessed and evaluated based on five achievement levels. (AP French Language and Culture Curriculum Framework)

Spoken Interpersonal Communication depicts a student's ability to engage in the oral exchange of information, opinions, and ideas in a variety of time frames as well as in both formal and informal situations. In this area, students should be able to clarify and explain the meaning of what they say through multiple strategies. They should be able to provide support for their opinions. Students must also be able to both initiate and sustain a conversation. In conversation, they should have at their disposal a diverse, varied vocabulary which includes culturally appropriate idiomatic expressions pertaining to a variety of topics. Lastly, the students should

demonstrate that they have knowledge and understanding of the target culture and other content across a variety of disciplines. (AP French Language and Culture Curriculum Framework)

Students at achievement level five in the area of Spoken Interpersonal Communication are described as meeting all ascribed criteria with the ability to “initiate, maintain, and close conversations on familiar topics in a culturally appropriate manner most of the time;” the ability to “use a variety of communication strategies” such as paraphrasing, circumlocution, and asking for clarification; varied vocabulary; the ability to properly implement simple, compound, and some complex sentence structures; appropriate register; proper pronunciation; and the ability to discuss and compare to their own culture various aspects of the French culture such as history, geography, art, and politics (AP French Language and Culture Curriculum Framework). The abilities depicted here most closely match those described at the Intermediate High level of Interpersonal Communication in the NCSSFL-ACTFL Can-Do Statements as a student at this level can “participate with ease and confidence in conversations on familiar topics...in various time frames,” and “handle social interactions in everyday situations (NCSSFL-ACTFL Can-Do Statements). From level four down, the achievement levels described by the College Board align with the ACTFL proficiency levels, relating a four to Intermediate Mid, a three to Intermediate Low, a two to Novice High, and a one to Novice Mid or Novice Low.

The learning objectives for Written Interpersonal Communication are very similar to those for Spoken Interpersonal Communication. Here, the student should be able to engage in the “written exchange of information, opinions, and ideas in a variety of time frames” in both formal and informal situations (AP French Language and Culture Curriculum Framework). The same variety in terms of vocabulary, idiomatic expressions, grammar usage, and clarification strategies should be implemented in their writing as in their speech. Students should also be able to write

about many different familiar topics, particularly about various aspects of the French culture.

(AP French Language and Culture Curriculum Framework)

With achievement level descriptions nearly identical to those of Spoken Interpersonal Communication, it can once again be concluded that achievement level five corresponds to the ACTFL Interpersonal Communication proficiency level Intermediate High, four to Intermediate Mid, three to Intermediate Low, two to Novice High, and one to Novice Mid or Novice Low.

In the AP French Language and Culture Curriculum Framework, Interpretive Communication refers to “the appropriate cultural interpretation of meanings that occur in written and spoken form.” Audio, Visual, and Audiovisual Interpretive Communication is described as having the following learning outcomes: students are able to comprehend content from authentic audio, visual, and audiovisual sources; they understand a variety of vocabulary and idiomatic expressions; they can correctly interpret the message and point of view being portrayed as well as the type of source; and they are then able to process the message, thinking critically about what they have seen or heard and able to make connections between the French culture and their own (AP French Language and Culture Curriculum Framework). This area of communication is most closely related to ACTFL’s area of Interpretive Listening. Here, determining the corresponding ACTFL proficiency level and AP achievement level is a bit more difficult as the descriptors for Intermediate High proficiency and Advanced Low are extremely similar: the key difference between them is the fact that at Intermediate High proficiency, a student will “easily understand the main idea in messages and presentations on a variety of topics related to everyday life and personal interests and studies,” while a student at the Advanced Low proficiency level will also understand supporting details on topics of both personal and general interest (NCSSFL-ACTFL Can-Do Statements). The description for achievement level five

seems to fall between these two descriptions as students at this level should be able to identify the main idea as well as some significant details (AP French Language and Culture Curriculum Framework). The key issue here is the interpretation of the words “supporting” in the ACTFL Advanced Low description and “significant” in the AP French Language and Culture Curriculum Framework; however, “supporting” seems to imply that the details are more secondary to the topic at hand and perhaps more subtle than a detail described as “significant.” Therefore, these distinctions between understanding only familiar topics and some more general topics as well as understanding primarily the main idea and significant details as opposed to understanding additionally the supporting details suggests that the level five achievement would be best equated to Intermediate High. Thus, achievement levels four to one correspond to proficiency levels Intermediate Mid to Novice Mid or Low respectively.

The second form of Interpretive Communication is Written and Print Interpretive Communication. This area of communication depicts a student’s ability to comprehend content from authentic written and print sources, exhibiting critical reading of these source in the cultural context and identification of distinguishing features of the source such as its purpose, the point of view of the author, and its intended audience. The student should also be able to examine and evaluate the source in order to better understand the author’s and, more broadly, the culture’s perspectives so that they may also be able to identify similarities and differences with their own culture. (AP French Language and Culture Curriculum Framework)

Related to the ACTFL Interpretive Reading proficiency levels, a student at AP achievement level five can “identify main ideas and supporting details on a range of topics” (AP French Language and Culture Curriculum Framework). This is nearly identical to the Advanced Low proficiency level description which states that a student “can understand the main idea and

some supporting details on a variety of topics of personal and general interest.” There is again some hesitation though when concluding that this achievement level five is equivalent to proficiency level Advanced Low due to the words “identify” and “understand:” to be able to identify something does not necessarily equate to the ability to understand something; however, as the word “identify” falls under the description titled “Comprehension of Content,” it can be inferred that in this case, at achievement level five, to identify main ideas and some supporting details will also imply understanding of these topics. Thus, achievement level five to achievement level one corresponds respectively to proficiency levels Advanced Low to Novice High and below.

Spoken Presentational Communication refers to a students’ ability to produce “a variety of creative oral presentations,” retell or summarize “information in narrative form,” and give persuasive speeches. The student should be able to present information on both familiar topics and researched topics for which they can use reference tools in order to acknowledge and cite the relevant sources. Here, making connections between the AP achievement levels and the ACTFL proficiency levels is difficult in that the NCSSFL-ACTFL Can-Do Statements focus on specific examples of topics about which a student can speak, while the AP French Language and Culture Curriculum Framework describes more generally the type of discourse students should be able to produce. Although, being that these students are in high school, it is unlikely that they would have the skills to describe some of the more complex issues that are cited under the Advanced Low proficiency level. Thus, an achievement level of five is comparable to proficiency level Intermediate High, four to Intermediate Mid, three to Intermediate Low, two to Novice High, and one to Novice Mid or Novice Low.

The final area of communication is Written Presentational Communication. A student should be able to produce creative writing, narratives, research papers, and persuasive essays all while keeping in mind who their target audience is. They should also be able to appropriately acknowledge and cite any sources and demonstrate appropriate grammatical conventions and varied vocabulary. Once again, determining the relation between the AP achievement levels and the ACTFL proficiency levels is difficult in that the NCSSFL-ACTFL Can-Do Statements focus on specific examples of the types of types of written work a student should be able to produce, while the AP French Language and Culture Curriculum Framework describes what writing qualities attribute to each achievement level. In this case, it is important to note the types of writing samples a student will be asked to produce on the AP exam, which include an email reply and a persuasive essay, both of which seem more similar to the types of writing samples students are expected to be able to produce at the Intermediate High proficiency level. Hence, achievement level five to achievement level one corresponds to proficiency level Intermediate High to Novice Mid or Novice Low respectively.

International Baccalaureate

In the IB program, there are three different Language B (the language acquisition course) exams that may be taken by students depending on their abilities in the foreign language as the three exams are at three different levels of difficulty: there are the Higher Level (HL) exam, the Standard Level (SL) exam, and the Ab Initio exam, with the HL exam being the most advanced and the ab initio exam being the least advanced. The IB Syllabus Outline for Language B provides a concise description of what a student should learn at the standard level and the higher level. The difference between these two levels is found in the recommended number of teaching hours, the depth of the coverage of the syllabus, the fact that literature is studied at the HL, and

level of difficulty of the assessments and final examination with much more being demanded of students at the HL. (Language B guide)

Across all levels, HL, SL, and ab initio, the teacher will create a monolingual environment in which only the target language is spoken in order to fully immerse students into the target language. Also in common among all levels of Language B instruction is that the core of instruction is divided into the following three main areas: communication and media, global issues, and social relationships. The focus of communication and media is how people interact as well as how they gather and share data to either inform or entertain. In this area, the possible aspects to cover are the following: advertising, bias in media, censorship, internet, mail, press, radio and television, sensationalism in media, and telephone. Global issues, as the name suggests, centers around current and future matters from the perspective of the target culture that have an impact regionally, nationally, or internationally. Aspects of global issues that may be covered are the following: drugs, energy reserves, food and water, global warming, climate change, natural disasters, globalization, international economy, migration, poverty and famine, racism, prejudice, discrimination, the effect of man on nature, and the environment and sustainability. The area of social relationships centers on “how people interrelate and behave—as members of a community, individually, and in groups.” Here, the topics that may be covered are celebrations, social and religious events; educational systems; language and cultural identity or self-identity; linguistic dominance; minorities; multilingualism; nationalism, patriotism, fanaticism; relationships; social and/or political structures; social behaviors and stances; and taboos versus what is socially acceptable. (Language B guide)

In addition to these three main areas of study, instructors may choose any two of the following options: cultural diversity, customs and traditions, health, leisure, and science and

technology. Cultural diversity deals with “the ethnic, gender, racial, ideological, and socio-economic varieties within a community of the target language.” In this area, a teacher may cover any of the following: beliefs, values, and norms; culinary heritage; how culture is learned; intercultural assimilation; interlinguistic influence; language diversity; migration; population diversity; subcultures; the concepts of human beauty; and verbal and non-verbal communication. Customs and traditions encompasses all practices, representations, expressions, and knowledge, both current and past, which belong to communities who speak the target language. Possible areas of study in this option are celebrations, social and religious events; dress codes, uniforms; etiquette and protocols; fashion; food; historical events; national costumes; and the arts. Health deals with “physical, mental, and social well-being, as well as matters related to illnesses.” In terms of health, one may cover any of the following: concepts of beauty and health; diet and nutrition; drug abuse; epidemics; health services; hygiene; illnesses, symptoms of good/ill health; mental health; physical exercise; surgery; and traditional and alternative medicine. Leisure includes any activities that are performed for enjoyment, so in this area, one may discuss entertainment, exhibitions and shows, games, hobbies, recreation, social interaction through leisure, sports, or travelling. The final option, science and technology, deals with the “relationship between science and technology, and their impact on a community of the target language.” Possible aspects to cover in this area include the following: entertainment, ethics and science, ethics and technology, the impact of information technology on society, natural sciences, renewable energy, scientific research, and social sciences. (Language B guide)

One thing that must be addressed in IB Language B curriculum is the fact that every teacher must choose what vocabulary, idiomatic expressions, and language structures should be included in their instruction, so there will be variation from the curriculum specifically taught in

one classroom to the next; however, all IB Language B teachers use the IB Syllabus Outline to provide them with principles of course design with which they should formulate their own curricula. Additionally, all students are working to attain the same levels of proficiency and are graded according to their level based on a set of grade descriptors which detail what a student's capabilities in the foreign language should be in order to receive a given score. Thus, generalizations can be made about the proficiency levels attained by students learning French through an IB Language B course. (Language B guide)

On each IB exam, students receive a score or grade between seven and one with seven indicating the best possible score and one being the lowest. The IB Diploma Programme Grade Descriptors detail the requirements and what skills or capabilities a student must be able demonstrate in order to receive each score. What is required to attain each score is dependent on whether a student is studying at the HL, SL, or ab initio level. Therefore, the grade descriptor of what it means to receive each score one through seven is different for each level. Also, in the case of IB, the descriptions of scores are not broken down into the different types of communication like those of AP, so each score will be related more generally to an ACTFL proficiency level based on the NCSSFL-ACTFL Can-Do Benchmarks rather than determining in each area of communication an where an IB Language B score would fall.

In order to receive a score of seven on the IB HL Language B exam, a student must be able to do the following:

 speak with clarity and fluency; use a richly varied and idiomatic range of language very accurately; handle ideas effectively and skillfully with active and complex interaction; demonstrate a thorough understanding of the meaning and purpose of written texts; have little difficulty with the most difficult questions;

recognize almost all the subtleties of specific language usage; write detailed and expressive texts demonstrating an excellent command of vocabulary and complex structures with a consistently high level of grammatical accuracy; demonstrate clarity of thought in the organization of their work and an ability to engage, convince and influence the audience.

(IB Diploma Programme Grade Descriptors)

This description of a student's capabilities most closely match the description of a proficiency level of Advanced Low because it should be noted that on the IB Language B exams, all texts and topics which are to be discussed should be somewhat familiar to the students: they have studied communication and media, global issues, and social relationships as well as two of the options (cultural diversity, customs and traditions, health, leisure, and science and technology), so the students are not expected to be able to express themselves on topics other than those that are somewhat familiar; therefore, students taking IB French would not be able to exhibit language proficiency qualities beyond Advanced Low because being able to express themselves on topics that are not only familiar is not an expectation of IB students while it is part of the description to be able to discuss topics beyond those that are familiar at the Advanced Mid proficiency level (NCSSFL-ACTFL Can-Do Statements). Now, as one would expect, from a score of six down to a score of one, the scores correspond to proficiency levels Intermediate High down to Novice Low.

On the IB SL Language B exam, to receive a score of seven, a student must be able to do the following:

 speak clearly, fluently and naturally; use a varied and idiomatic range of language accurately; handle ideas effectively with active and full interaction; demonstrate a

very good understanding of the meaning and purpose of written texts; have little difficulty with more difficult questions; write detailed texts demonstrating a very good command of vocabulary and complex structures with a very good level of grammatical accuracy; adapt their writing effectively to suit the intended audience and purpose; express their ideas and organize their work coherently and convincingly.

(IB Diploma Programme Grade Descriptors)

This description is nearly identical to that of a score of six on IB HL Language B exam. With the exception of the ability to “recognize most of the subtleties of specific language usage,” which is included in the description of a six on the HL Language B exam and not a part of the description of a seven on the SL Language B exam. This, having characteristics that are just slightly different or varied, is common across all HL and SL Language B score descriptions: the difference between the descriptions of an HL score of five and an SL score of six is the inclusion of students ability to “recognize some subtleties of specific language usage;” the difference between the descriptions of an HL score of four and an SL score of five is the inclusion of students ability to “recognize a few subtleties of specific language usage;” the difference between the descriptions of an HL score of three and an SL score of four is that to receive a three on the HL Language B exam, a student should be able to “produce an identifiable text type,” while to attain a four on the SL Language B exam, a student should be able to “show some ability to adapt their writing to suit the intended audience and purpose;” the difference between the descriptions of an HL score of two and an SL score of three is that to receive a two on the HL Language B exam, a student should be able to “produce an identifiable text type with limited success,” while to attain a three on the SL Language B exam, a student should be able to

“produce an identifiable text type;” and finally, to receive an HL Language B exam score of one, a student must “produce a barely identifiable text type,” while on the SL Language B exam, in order to attain a score of two, a student should be able to “produce an identifiable text type with limited success” (IB Diploma Programme Grade Descriptors).

The question in determining the corresponding proficiency levels for the SL Language B exam scores is deciding how significant these variations are between the SL and HL score descriptors and whether or not these differences will greatly influence proficiency level as these score descriptors are compared to the NCSSFL-ACTFL Can-Do Benchmarks. The ability to recognize most, some, or a few subtleties of specific language use means that the student’s ability to listen or read and understand the language would be more developed than one who does not have these skills; however, the fact that these were not specifically listed as characteristics of a student who scores a seven, six, or five on SL Language B exam does not mean that the student does not possess these skills. The difference between an HL score of three and an SL score of four, an HL score of two and an SL score of three, and an HL score of one and an SL score of two has to do with a student’s writing abilities, specifically the type of text he or she is able to produce. While writing abilities do give great insight into a student’s level of proficiency, it could be argued in this case that that producing a specific type of text could be indicative of a student’s writing abilities in general and their familiarity with a specific writing style. The ACTFL proficiency level Can-Do Benchmarks and Can-Do Statements indicate at the Novice High proficiency level, a student should be able to “write short messages and notes on familiar topics related to everyday life;” at the Novice Mid proficiency level, a student should be able to “write lists and memorized phrases on familiar topics;” and at the Novice Low proficiency level, a student should be able to “copy some familiar words, characters, or phrases” (NCSSFL-

ACTFL Can-Do Statements). It would then appear that in the area of writing, while short messages and lists were listed as examples of what a student is able to write effectively at these proficiency levels, his or her abilities in regard to formulating a specific text type, such as an email or letter or blog post, is not addressed. Thus, because the rest of the characteristics indicate that the HL scores of one through six are comparable to SL scores of two through seven, these scores should indicate the same levels of proficiency from Novice Low to Intermediate High. This then leaves a score of one on the SL Language B exam as not ranking on the ACTFL proficiency scale.

The descriptions of the grades on the ab initio Language B exam are set up differently than their HL and SL counterparts because where the HL and SL descriptions were written in as a list of characteristics, the descriptions of ab initio scores are broken down into the following three categories: receptive skills, interactive skills, and productive skills (IB Diploma Programme Grade Descriptors). These skill types, receptive, interactive, and productive, correspond respectively to the ACTFL areas of Interpretive Reading and Interpretive Listening, Interpersonal Communication, and Presentational Writing and Presentational Speaking.

To attain an ab initio score of seven on the Language B exam, in terms of receptive skills a student must be able to “respond clearly and effectively to all simple and most complex information and ideas” (IB Diploma Programme Grade Descriptors). This description, while not very detailed, can be interpreted as meaning that familiar and simple texts and audio examples are understood as well as complex ideas relating to these familiar topics; however, the student may not be able to understand when they are hearing or reading about something that is unfamiliar to them. This description can be said to most closely match the Interpretive Listening and Interpretive Reading proficiency level of Intermediate Mid.

In terms of interactive skills, in order to receive a seven on the ab initio Language B exam, a student should be able to “respond accurately, communicate effectively and demonstrate comprehension;” their “pronunciation and intonation always facilitate the understanding of the message;” he or she should be able to “sustain participation and make good independent contributions;” and finally, the message he or she is trying to convey should always be clear (IB Diploma Programme Grade Descriptors). This description could potentially fit the Intermediate Low or Intermediate Mid proficiency levels as the descriptions for these two levels in Interpersonal Communication are very similar; however, at the Intermediate Mid proficiency level, a student “can usually say what [he or she wants] to say about [his or herself] and [his or her] everyday life,” which suggests that a score of seven in the realm of interactive skills should indicate a proficiency level of Intermediate Mid in Interpersonal Communication because it is mentioned that the message a student is trying to convey is clear, indicating that he or she is able to communicate exactly what he or she is trying to communicate (NCSSFL-ACTFL Can-Do Statements).

In order to attain a score of seven on the ab initio Language B exam, in terms of productive skills, a student must be able to “develop ideas well using an effective, logical structure;” “successfully use a range of simple and some complex cohesive devices;” “use both basic and complex grammatical structures accurately;” “use varied and effective vocabulary and appropriate register;” and “demonstrate clear evidence of intercultural understanding where required;” however, a student at this level “may make occasional errors in complex structures” (IB Diploma Programme Grade Descriptors). Because of the fact that it is noted that at this level, students do make errors in complex structures, this would lead a score of seven in the area of

productive skills on the ab initio Language B exam to be equivalent to an ACTFL proficiency level of Intermediate Mid in Presentational Speaking and Presentational Writing.

Receiving a score of seven across all three skill types indicates a proficiency level of Intermediate Mid, thus the scores three through six correspond to the proficiency levels Novice Low through Intermediate Low respectively. Once again, there are scores, in this case a score of one or two, which do not correspond to an ACTFL proficiency level as the proficiency levels attained by students who receive these scores are lower than Novice Low.

College Level Examination Program

The CLEP French Language exam is different from both the AP and IB exams in that anyone may take it: the students who take this exam have not necessarily taken a specific course like AP or IB; they have simply studied the language, and because they have not taken an AP or IB French course to take one of those exams to potentially earn college credit, they may take the CLEP French Language exam. The purpose of the CLEP French Language exam is “to measure knowledge and ability equivalent to that of students who have completed two to four semesters of college French language study,” so the exam “focuses on skills typically acquired from the end of the first year through the second year of college study;” therefore, in order to take this measurement of a student’s capabilities in French, “material taught during both years is incorporated into a single exam.” Unlike the AP and IB exams which assess students’ verbal, listening, reading, and writing skills, the CLEP French Language exam assesses only students’ reading and listening abilities as “candidates must demonstrate their ability to understand spoken and written French;” thus, in the case of this exam, proficiency can only be determined in the ACTFL areas of Interpretive Reading and Interpretive Listening. (CLEP French Language: At a Glance)

There are three sections on the CLEP French Language exam: Listening: Rejoinders, Listening: Dialogues and Narratives, and Reading. In the first section of listening

comprehension, the student must choose “the best responses to short spoken prompts,” and in the second section of listening comprehension, the student must choose “the answers to questions based on longer spoken selections.” The reading comprehension section of the exam is broken down into three parts, of which the first two focus on vocabulary and structure, first in discrete sentences and then in short cloze passages. The third section of the reading comprehension portion of the exam consists of “reading passages and authentic stimulus materials.” (CLEP French Language: At a Glance)

There is not a breakdown of scores that is readily available for the CLEP French Language exam that depicts the characteristics a student must possess in order to receive a given score: this makes it difficult to determine what level of proficiency is achieved according to the ACTFL Can-Do Statements as there is nothing specifically to compare to these statements. Despite this lack of description of the scores, according to a document which explains the meaning of CLEP exam scores, students who take and perform well on the Level 1 French Language exam should be at the proficiency level equivalent to those who have completed the first two semesters (or six credit hours) of “college-level world language course work,” and students who take and perform well on the Level 2 French Language exam should be at the proficiency level equivalent to those who have completed the first four semesters (or twelve credit hours) “of college-level world language course work” (What Your CLEP Score Means). Then, according to the study done by CASLS titled “How Do Proficiency Levels Compare Between K-12 and University Students?,” based on the percentages of university students who attain each level of proficiency in reading, a student who performs well on the CLEP Level 1 French Language exam will be at a reading proficiency level of Novice Low to Novice High, and

a student who performs well on the CLEP Level 2 French Language exam will be at a reading proficiency of Novice High to Intermediate Low.

According to these analyses of AP French and IB French exams, a student who performs well on the AP or IB exams, receiving a score of four or five on the AP exam or a score of five, six, or seven on the IB HL exam or a score of six or seven on the IB SL exam or a score of seven on the IB ab initio exam, will theoretically be at a proficiency level equal to or higher than that achieved by most students who have completed four semesters or the first two years of study of French at the post-secondary level. This is surprising as it seems unlikely that high school students would have abilities in the French language superior to those of college students; however, it is important to remember that the AP and IB French language courses are advanced; they are designed to be more challenging than the average high school French course. Thus, these courses provide insight into how some students leave high school more proficient in the foreign language than those studying French at the post-secondary level because while this may be unlikely, CASLS found in their study, “How Do Proficiency Levels Compare Between K-12 and University Students?,” that three and a half percent of high school students will be at a writing proficiency level of Intermediate High or above and one point four percent will be at a speaking proficiency level of Intermediate High or above following the completion of four years of secondary foreign language study. Thus, students who receive high scores on the AP and IB exams could be considered outliers. The test results of students who take the CLEP French language exam are arguably more indicative of the proficiency levels attained by high school students studying French in the United States.

Language Acquisition at the Post-Secondary Level

In contrast to the acquisition of French or any other foreign language at the secondary level in the United States, at the post-secondary level, there is no set of guidelines or standards that all universities are required to follow. This makes it difficult to make generalizations about proficiency levels achieved by college students because the curriculum or course requirements for French language and culture studies will vary from one university to the next. Therefore, one may consider again the studies done by CASLS. It was determined that the majority of students after completing the equivalent of two years or four semesters of foreign language study at the secondary level will attain proficiency levels in reading and writing from Novice High to Intermediate Mid and in speaking from Novice High to Intermediate Low. This is why, based on educational input, students who take AP or IB French may be more proficient overall than college students after two years of study. In fact, this is true even after three years of study at the post-secondary level where most students' abilities in the target language are at proficiency levels of Novice High to Intermediate Mid. Now, this brings into question how the proficiency levels achieved by those who have completed AP or French language courses compare to students who have completed four years or eight semesters of French study at the post-secondary level. (How Do Proficiency Levels Compare Between K-12 and University Students?)

Despite the lack of standard French curriculum amongst universities in the United States, there are exams which are taken by many college students studying French to assess their abilities in the language following the completion of four years of undergraduate study. In Michigan, undergraduate students studying French with the intention of teaching the language take the Michigan Test for Teacher Certification (MTTC) in French. In approximately forty other states across the country, the Praxis exam in French is taken by aspiring French teachers in order

to assess their abilities in the language (Frequently Asked Questions About The Praxis Series® Tests). While these exams are only assessing the French abilities of prospective French teachers, those students who are taking the exams are a sample of all students taking French courses at a given university. Therefore, while the sample of students taking these exams may not be acquired randomly, it does provide some insight into the proficiency levels achieved by students studying French at the post-secondary level. Thus, without any other set of standards unifying French curricula in universities, these Praxis and MTTC exams will provide sufficient examples of what must be included in these curricula.

Michigan Test for Teacher Certification

The objective of the French MTTC exam is to assess whether or not an aspiring French teacher has the “the knowledge, skills, and understanding an entry-level teacher needs in order to teach effectively in a Michigan classroom.” In order to effectively test a student’s knowledge, skills, and understanding, this exam consists of the following three sections: “a listening section with multiple-choice questions,” “a reading section with multiple-choice questions,” and “a written performance assignment section with two written performance assignments.” On this exam, there are six subareas which each make up a different percentage of the exam: Listening Comprehension makes up fifteen percent; Reading Comprehension makes up fifteen percent; Language Structures and Comparisons makes up fifteen percent; Cultural Understanding, Comparisons, and Connections makes up fifteen percent; Language Acquisition, Instruction, and Assessment makes up twenty percent of the exam, and Writing makes up twenty percent of the exam. (Michigan Test for Teacher Certification Study Guide)

Listening Comprehension assesses an examinee’s ability to “derive information from a variety of authentic oral communications in French representing interpersonal and presentational

modes in social and academic situations.” This may include determining the main idea of a spoken passage, identifying any additional significant details, and understanding questions, comments, a sequence of steps or directions, and cause or effect situations described orally. In this subarea, students are also asked to “apply skills of inference to a variety of authentic oral communications in French representing interpersonal and presentational modes in social and academic situations.” These inference skills may be shown through drawing conclusions, making predictions on the outcomes of a described situation, determining the tone or mood of one of the speakers, discerning an implied cause and effect relationship, determining the social relationships or cultural context of a given oral communication, and being able to select the appropriate response to a spoken question or comment. (Michigan Test for Teacher Certification Study Guide)

If a student performs well on this section of the exam and is able to demonstrate all of the abilities described above, then in the ACTFL area of Interpretive Listening, the student would be at a proficiency level of Advanced Mid as the description of this proficiency level in terms of Interpretive Listening is comparable to the description of the subarea Listening Comprehension. In order to be considered at a proficiency level of Advanced Mid in terms of interpretive listening skills, one must be able to “understand the main idea and most supporting details on a variety of topics of personal and general interest, as well as some topics of professional interest;” “follow stories and descriptions of some length and in various time frames;” and “understand information presented in most genres, even when not familiar with the topic.” (NCSSFL-ACTFL Can-Do Statements)

Reading Comprehension deals with a student’s ability to “derive information from a variety of authentic materials, written in French, representing interpersonal and presentational

modes.” This may include any of the following abilities: identifying the main idea of a written passage, determining the significant details of a written passage, recognizing a stated cause-and-effect relationship, and distinguishing a sequence of events. In this subarea, students are also asked to apply their inference skills to the written passage in the same ways in which they were applied to the oral passages in the Listening Comprehension section of the exam. (Michigan Test for Teacher Certification Study Guide)

Just as the descriptions of Listening Comprehension and Reading Comprehensions in the MTTC study guide are practically identical, so are the description of what it means to be at a proficiency level of Advanced Mid in both Interpretive Listening and Interpretive Reading. Thus, a student who succeeds and meets all expectations in the Reading Comprehension subarea of the MTTC French exam should be at an Interpretive Reading proficiency level of Advanced Mid.

In the Language Structures and Comparisons subarea, examinees are asked to “demonstrate knowledge of the grammatical and syntactic structures of French,” which includes determining whether the use of words, forms of words, phrases, or clauses is grammatically correct in a given context as well as “recognizing grammatically correct language structures or usage.” Students should also be able to “understand the similarities and differences between English and French.” This ability should be demonstrated through being able to compare and contrast the sound systems, word meanings, word order, and morphological structures in English and French. (Michigan Test for Teacher Certification Study Guide)

Cultural Understanding, Comparisons, and Connections assesses a student’s ability to “understand the products and perspectives of French-speaking cultures” as well as their practices such as “political and economic practices, practices of daily life, and communication.” In this subarea, students may be asked to demonstrate their knowledge and understanding of

products that are used in daily life of French-speaking cultures; characterize major literary, artistic, architectural, and technological works of French-speaking cultures; discuss how these works portray the perspectives of people in French-speaking cultures; understand major political, economic, social, and cultural trends; and finally, they are asked to make comparisons between the United States and French-speaking cultures in reference to these products, practices, and perspectives. (Michigan Test for Teacher Certification Study Guide)

Language Acquisition, Instruction, and Assessment is the subarea that encompasses the greatest variety of material; however, this subarea also deals exclusively with an aspiring teacher's knowledge and understanding of the principals of assessment, the role of the teacher, the principals of language instruction, and the "integration of standards into language curriculum and instruction." Thus, this subarea is not pertinent to this paper as it does not reflect topics that all students studying French at the post-secondary level will cover: this subarea deals with methods courses and topics that relate only to teaching. (Michigan Test for Teacher Certification Study Guide)

In the final subarea, Writing, examinees are asked to "write a well-organized, cohesive passage of several paragraphs in French on an assigned topic," approximately two hundred to two hundred-fifty words in length. In the production of his or her written passage, a student should use "language that is appropriate for a given purpose, occasion, and context;" use "language structures that are appropriate for a given time frame;" use "a range of vocabulary, expressions, and sentence structures;" and demonstrate "a command of the written conventions of French." (Michigan Test for Teacher Certification Study Guide)

This description of the Writing subarea of the MTTC French exam is comparable to the description of Presentational Writing in the NCSSFL-ACTFL Can-Do Statements. If a student

meets all of the requirements and performs well in this subarea, their proficiency level in Presentational Writing would arguably be Advanced Mid as the description of this proficiency level most closely matches that of Writing. To be at this level of proficiency in terms of writing abilities, one must be able to “write well-organized, detailed paragraphs in various time frames” “on a wide variety of general interest, professional, and academic topics.” (NCSSFL-ACTFL Can-Do Statements)

These descriptions of the subareas of the MTTC French exam provide valuable insight into what must be included in the French curriculum of Michigan universities. However, the downfall of analyzing these exam requirements is that like the CLEP exam, score descriptions are not readily available to assess and compare to the NCSSFL-ACTFL Can-Do Statements in order to determine the specific levels of proficiency reached by those who do not perform optimally and receive high scores on this exam.

Praxis

Like the MTTC French exam, the Praxis French: World Language exam is taken by aspiring French teachers in order to assess their knowledge of the French language and culture. The Praxis exam in French is specifically “designed to measure the knowledge, skills, and abilities of examinees who have had preparation in a program for teaching French in grades K-12.” This exam includes four sections: sections one is Listening with Cultural Knowledge, section two is Reading with Cultural Knowledge, section three is Writing, and section four is Speaking. These four sections are broken down into five content categories, each of which includes an approximate number of questions and makes up an approximate percentage of the examination. The first content category, Interpretive Mode: Listening including embedded linguistic content, accounts for approximately twenty-six percent of the exam and includes

approximately thirty selected response questions. The second content category, Interpretive Mode: Reading including embedded linguistic content, also makes up twenty-six percent of the exam and includes approximately thirty selected response questions. The third content category, Cultural Knowledge, accounts for approximately twelve percent of the exam and consists of approximately fifteen selected response questions. The fourth content category, Interpersonal and Presentational Modes: Writing, makes up approximately eighteen percent of the exam and includes three constructed, written responses. Finally, the fifth content category, Presentational and Interpersonal Modes: Speaking, takes up approximately eighteen percent of the exam and consists of three constructed, spoken responses. Interestingly, these content areas align with the areas of proficiency detailed in the ACFTL Proficiency Guidelines. In fact, this exam is written so that all sections “are at the Advanced Low level, as described in the proficiency guidelines of the American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Language.” Thus, due to this exam’s reliance on the ACTFL Proficiency Guidelines as a basis for assessing French language proficiency, scores on this exam should theoretically align with the ACTFL proficiency levels. The majority, approximately eighty-eight percent, of this exam focuses on the examinees’ abilities to demonstrate their proficiency in the French language. They should be able to communicate effectively in French with native speakers who do not have much experience interacting with nonnative speakers. Effectiveness of communication is determined based on “sufficient accuracy, clarity, and precision to convey the intended message.” (The Praxis Study Companion: French: World Language)

In the first section of this exam, Listening with Cultural Knowledge, the examinee listens to a variety of audio samples in French: these audio samples may be but are not limited to radio broadcasts, narratives, and dialogues. Examinees will have the opportunity to listen to each

sample twice, and then questions are asked based on the audio selection. In this listening portion of the exam, one should be able to understand both the main and supporting details of the audio samples. One should also be able to infer “the meaning of unfamiliar words and phrases in new contexts” and interpret the intent of the author or speaker as well as develop one’s “personal interpretation of the message.” Examinees should also understand “the gist of normal conversational speech on a variety of topics.” (The Praxis Study Companion: French: World Language)

In the second section of this exam, Reading with Cultural Knowledge, examinees are “presented with a variety of selections, such as newspaper articles, excerpts of literary passages, and other materials, in French,” and then must respond to questions based on the passages. Here, examinees’ ability to understand the main and supporting details of the sample texts is assessed as well as their interpretation of the author’s purpose and their ability to develop their own interpretation of what ideas are being portrayed in the text. (The Praxis Study Companion: French: World Language)

For both the listening and reading sections, detailed breakdowns of scores and descriptions of the listening and reading proficiency levels reached by examinees are not available. Thus, because the test is written at the Advanced Low level, it can be inferred that an examinee who scores well in each of these areas must be at a proficiency level of at least Advanced Low; however, there is unfortunately not a way to address what reading and listening proficiency levels are reached by those who do not receive high scores.

In the writing section of this exam, examinees are tasked with writing three compositions in French. The first composition gives examinees an opportunity to demonstrate their interpersonal writing skills in the form of an e-mail, memo, or letter. Examinees are given one of

the aforementioned communications and are then asked to write an appropriate response in which they prove their knowledge of interpersonal communication “in written exchanges on daily topics.” The second and third compositions are demonstrations of examinees’ presentational writing skills: prompts are given which define the required topics of the composition, and in response to these prompts, examinees must demonstrate their abilities to write “coherent narratives, descriptions, and summaries about familiar topics of a factual nature in paragraph length in present, past, and future tense.” These written compositions are evaluated on the following attributes:

- Overall comprehensibility to a native speaker of French who is not accustomed to the writing of nonnative learners
- Accuracy and appropriateness of content
- Presentation of ideas in a related and logical manner
- Appropriateness of vocabulary
- Accuracy of grammar and mechanics (including spelling and diacritical marks)
- Cohesiveness (including use of varied sentence structure and transitional expressions where appropriate)
- Appropriateness for a given task and/or reader (register)
- The extent to which each task is completed

(The Praxis Study Companion: French: World Language)

In the fourth and final section of this exam, Speaking, examinees are given three tasks through which they must demonstrate different aspects of their French speaking abilities. These tasks will include both formal and informal conversations on a variety of topics including home,

school, leisure activities, and current events as well as an oral presentation “on familiar literary or cultural topics.” The first task deals with the final passage of the Writing section: examinees are given time to review the passage and then “hear a prompt describing a task related to [the] passage.” The second task is a demonstration of the examinees’ presentational speaking and their abilities to express their opinions orally. The third task is a simulated conversation which addresses interpersonal speaking. Examinees’ speaking abilities are evaluated on the following:

- Overall comprehensibility to a native speaker of French who is not accustomed to interacting with nonnative speakers
- Accuracy and appropriateness of the content
- Presentation of ideas in a related and logical manner
- Appropriateness of vocabulary
- Accuracy of grammar and pronunciation
- Fluency of delivery and cohesiveness (including use of varied sentence structure and transitional expressions where appropriate)
- Appropriateness for a given task and/or listener
- The extent to which each task is completed

(The Praxis Study Companion: French: World Language)

On both the written and spoken sections of the exam, examinees will receive a score from low or zero to high or three. In both of these areas, a score of three or High corresponds to an Advanced level of proficiency, a score of two or Mid-High corresponds to an Intermediate High proficiency level, a score of one or Mid-Low corresponds to an Intermediate Low proficiency level, and a score of zero or Low corresponds to a Novice level of proficiency.

Conclusion

The chart on the following page shows the ACTFL proficiency levels which should theoretically be attained by students who receive a given score on the AP, IB, CLEP, Praxis, or MTTC French exams, concisely presenting the findings of this investigation. This proves that students studying French at the secondary level have the potential to attain similar proficiency levels to students studying French at the post-secondary level; however it is important to remember that this conclusion is drawn solely based on the educational input students should receive in order to succeed on the AP, IB, CLEP, Praxis, an MTTC exams in French, and the actual proficiency levels of a student who receives a given score on one of the exams may not necessarily align with the proficiency level that is theoretically equivalent to his or her score. It is also important to note that, specifically regarding the AP French scores, there are currently no correlational studies published on the alignment between exam scores and the ACTFL proficiency scale.

Further research may be done through correlational studies between AP, IB, CLEP, Praxis, and MTTC exam scores and the ACTFL proficiency scale. This topic may also be explored further with a focus on learning outcomes: testing the students' actual abilities rather than basing conclusions on educational input and expectations of students' abilities.

	Novice Low	Novice Mid	Novice High	Intermediate Low	Intermediate Mid	Intermediate High	Advanced Low	Advanced Mid
Interpersonal Communication	IB HL 1 IB SL 2 IB ab initio 3	IB HL 2 IB SL 3 AP I IB ab initio 4	IB HL 3 IB SL 4 AP 2 IB ab initio 5	IB HL 4 IB SL 5 AP 3 IB ab initio 6	IB HL 5 IB SL 6 AP 4 IB ab initio 7	IB HL 6 IB SL 7 AP 5	Praxis IB HL 7	MTTC
Presentational Speaking	IB HL 1 IB SL 2 IB ab initio 3	IB HL 2 IB SL 3 AP I IB ab initio 4	Praxis 0 IB HL 3 IB SL 4 AP 2 IB ab initio 5	Praxis 1 IB HL 4 IB SL 5 AP 3 IB ab initio 6	IB HL 5 IB SL 6 AP 4 IB ab initio 7	Praxis 2 IB HL 6 IB SL 7 AP 5	Praxis 3 IB HL 7	
Presentational Writing	IB HL 1 IB SL 2 IB ab initio 3	IB HL 2 IB SL 3 AP I IB ab initio 4	Praxis 0 IB HL 3 IB SL 4 AP 2 IB ab initio 5	Praxis 1 IB HL 4 IB SL 5 AP 3 IB ab initio 6	IB HL 5 IB SL 6 AP 4 IB ab initio 7	Praxis 2 IB HL 6 IB SL 7 AP 5	Praxis 3 IB HL 7	MTTC
Interpretive Listening	IB HL 1 IB SL 2 IB ab initio 3	IB HL 2 IB SL 3 AP I IB ab initio 4	IB HL 3 IB SL 4 AP 2 IB ab initio 5	IB HL 4 IB SL 5 AP 3 IB ab initio 6	IB HL 5 IB SL 6 AP 4 IB ab initio 7	IB HL 6 IB SL 7 AP 5	Praxis IB HL 7	MTTC
Interpretive Reading	IB HL 1 IB SL 2 IB ab initio 3	IB HL 2 IB SL 3 IB ab initio 4	IB HL 3 IB SL 4 AP I IB ab initio 5 CLEP Level 1	IB HL 4 IB SL 5 AP 2 IB ab initio 6 CLEP Level 2	IB HL 5 IB SL 6 AP 3 IB ab initio 7	IB HL 6 IB SL 7 AP 4	Praxis IB HL 7 AP 5	MTTC

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