

# Foreign Language Assessment Database

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At the National Assessment Summit, a number of national priorities for foreign language assessment emerged. Included in the priorities was the need for a centralized database to provide information about available foreign language assessments for users at all levels. The Center for Applied Linguistics (CAL) received funding from the U.S. Department of Education, Title VI, International Research and Studies, to update, merge and improve two existing online, searchable foreign language assessment databases. In addition to database improvements, the project will provide moderated assessment reviews as well as a user tutorial on assessment use and selection. This project will contribute to the foreign language assessment field by providing a central source for language assessments, user reviews of these assessments, and assistance to users in selecting assessments for their purposes.

## ***Importance of an Assessment Database***

In recent years, accountability, often demonstrated through testing, has been emphasized in all aspects of education. This focus has been evidenced by the advent of the standards movement and the passage of No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act. While NCLB does not mandate testing for foreign languages, it does include foreign languages as a core academic subject: “The term ‘core academic subjects’ means English, reading or language arts, mathematics, science, foreign languages, civics and government, economics, arts, history, and geography” (U.S. Department of Education, 2002).

With this emphasis, the availability of quality assessments at all levels of education has become more urgent. This is especially true in foreign language education, which is often a lifetime pursuit. Diagnostic, achievement, proficiency, performance, and progress-based foreign language assessments are needed at the K–12 and university levels, as well as in professional and government sectors. Thus, locating adequate assessments for foreign languages has become a priority for foreign language educators. At the same time, the *Standards for Foreign Language Learning in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century* (National Standards in Foreign Language Education Project, 1999) describe content standards for foreign languages that define what students should know and be able to do with foreign languages.

Valid and reliable assessments must be available to measure the degree to which the standards are being met. Several needs exist:

1. Lack of assessments is a major issue facing foreign language educators. There is a paucity of assessments in both the commonly taught and less commonly taught languages, the latter being especially worrisome in light of recent events that underline the critical shortage in the U.S. of proficient speakers of these languages (House of Representatives, 2001).
2. Lack of information about what does exist and how best to use it is another major issue, one that this assessment database addresses.
3. In addition to the need for access to assessments of foreign languages, foreign language educators also need assistance in selecting assessments appropriate for their language teaching situations.
4. As Boyles also discusses (in this series of papers), there is a lack of “assessment literacy” or an understanding among foreign language educators about what assessment is and what educators should seek in appropriate, valid, reliable, and affordable assessments for their students. This lack of assessment literacy makes the choice of any available assessments, however appropriate, a difficult path for educators to manage; if educators do not know what is needed and appropriate, then even the best assessments cannot be of help. In the recent *ESOL [English for Speakers of Other Languages] Tests and Testing* (2005), authors Stoyhoff and Chapelle not only provide reviews of 20 ESOL tests, but have written four additional chapters on understanding tests, using test manuals, evaluating test usefulness, and decisions in developing a test. This volume recognizes the importance of testing for ESOL teachers, and testing is no less important for foreign language teachers. Therefore, addressing assessment literacy for foreign language educators in particular is an important aim of the project.

## **Landscape**

Currently, there are two primary, free foreign language assessment databases searchable on the Internet. The Foreign Language Test Database (<http://www.nclrc.org/fltestdb/>) is a searchable database of foreign language assessments designed for use with secondary and post-secondary students; it has been hosted on CAL’s website since 1999. Developed in 1991 through the National Capital Language Resource Center (NCLRC), the database originated in response to a high volume of requests for information on foreign language assessments. CAL solicited entries from assessment developers across the country and abroad and organized them into an electronic database. The information was updated when the database was published on the CAL website, and an option to add assessments to the website was included. Currently, the database comprises 154 assessments in 69 languages.

A second database, the Directory of K–12 Foreign Language Assessment Instruments and Resources (<http://www.cal.org/CALWebDB/FLAssess/>) was developed by the National K–12 Foreign Language Resource Center at Iowa State University and the Center for Applied Linguistics (Thompson, 2004). Originally a synthesis of two annotated assessment collections at CAL: the *Foreign Language Assessment in Grades K–8: An Annotated Bibliography of Assessment Instruments* (Thompson, 1997) and a collection of instruments used in grades 9–12, CAL has hosted this combined database on its website since 2000. This database includes descriptions of language assessments in 25

languages that are currently being used in elementary, middle, and secondary foreign language programs around the country.

Additionally, a prominent online testing database, the Buros Institute of Mental Measurement database, provides 61 short descriptions of foreign language tests. Professional reviews of all 61 tests can be ordered online for a charge. However, this database does not focus solely on foreign language tests and is not free of charge to users.

A number of databases exist that address foreign language teaching materials, the most comprehensive being the Language Materials Project (<http://www.lmp.ucla.edu/>); however, these databases do not include language tests. The lack of online foreign language assessment databases is disappointing in light of the current national conversation about the need for testing. However, experience in developing such a database shows that to develop a good database of assessments necessitates a great deal of painstaking work to locate, obtain, evaluate, and write about existing assessments.

The existing materials show that the Foreign Language Test Database (<http://www.nclrc.org/fltestdb>) and the Directory of K–12 Foreign Language Assessment Instruments and Resources (Thompson, 2004) are the most easily found and exhaustive, online, free, searchable databases for foreign language assessments. Each database contains a great deal of information, free of charge, for users. In addition, the K–12 directory includes a number of teacher-developed foreign language assessments useful for classroom-based assessment. Developing these into one comprehensive database for all foreign language assessments could greatly assist the field in meeting the need for assessment of student progress. Adding a tutorial on their use and assessment selection will make them even more useful to the target audience.

### ***Goals for the Next Three Years***

CAL's Foreign Language Test Database project will begin on October 1, 2005, and continue for three years. The project has three main objectives. First, CAL staff will revise currently outdated entries in both databases and publicize the databases. Second, they will revise the format based on feedback from online focus groups involving potential and existing users. This will involve combining the two databases, adding a CAL-moderated user review section, and changing the overall design. Third, they will educate users on approaches to selecting and using appropriate foreign language assessments through an online tutorial.

The first year of the project focuses on updating the content of the databases. This phase of the project will involve contacting the developers of all assessments in both databases, as well as eliciting additional entries of foreign language assessments. After contacting all developers, CAL staff will request information on all assessments for inclusion on the website. After the project is completed, the NCLRC and the National K–12 Language Resource Center (NFLRC) at Iowa State University will periodically update the databases.

During the second year of the project, the CAL team will begin working on the new website interface for the database. This phase of the project will include determining the new platform for the database, as well as conducting a series of focus groups to gather feedback on the categories necessary for inclusion in the database and the design of the CAL-moderated user review of database entries. The focus groups will comprise the target audience, including foreign language educators at all levels with varying

backgrounds in language testing and comfort in using technology. Such focus groups will allow CAL staff to develop user-friendly pages that will allow users to find appropriate information quickly. The focus groups will also allow CAL to develop new headings or explanations of assessments, as determined useful by the focus groups.

In the third year, CAL will develop a user tutorial on how to choose an assessment appropriate for the examiner's/examinee's purposes. The structure and content of the tutorial will be reviewed by leaders in the language testing and foreign language fields and will be piloted with target users. Providing this online tutorial addresses another of the National Assessment Summit priorities, the need for professional development in assessment for foreign language teachers as noted by Boyles (in this series of papers).

## **Conclusion**

CAL welcomes the opportunity to update and merge the two existing online foreign language databases to better serve the needs of the field. In addition to merging, updating, and re-formatting the existing two foreign language assessment databases, CAL will add a moderated review process and develop an online tutorial in assessment selection. In this way, the project will address three needs identified at the National Assessment Summit: the need for a single database, the provision of moderated user reviews to help future assessment users make informed decisions about specific assessments, and an approach to increasing assessment literacy in its users. While no one project can or should address exhaustively the complex needs for foreign language assessment, this project will help to address a few urgent issues simultaneously. This project will increase opportunities for teachers and other language professionals to learn more about assessments and assessment use.

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