

SAT[®] II: Subject Tests in Foreign Languages— Using the Tests for Admission and Placement

The SAT[®] II: Subject Tests in foreign languages provide schools with the opportunity to assess their students' ability to learn languages other than English in both everyday and academic settings. The following languages are represented in the SAT II: Subject Test battery¹:

Chinese	Korean
French	Latin
German	Modern Hebrew
Italian	Spanish
Japanese	

Some tests assess reading only (Italian, Latin, and Modern Hebrew), others assess reading and listening (Chinese, Japanese, and Korean), while others appear in both reading only and reading and listening modes (French, German, and Spanish).

Two Purposes for the Tests

As the SAT II: Subject Tests in foreign languages were developed, two purposes were kept in mind: (1) admission to institutions of higher education and (2) student placement in college language courses. Foreign languages represent an important academic domain in both higher education and K–12 education, and SAT II: Subject Tests are the only national assessments available that can serve in both the admission and placement function.

As an admissions test, the SAT II: Subject Tests in foreign languages allow students to demonstrate academic competence in the selected language area. Most four-year colleges and universities have specific academic course requirements for incoming freshmen in areas such as math, language arts, science, or social studies, and many institutions have similar requirements for foreign languages.

Academic achievement across a broad range of disciplines—rather than only one or two narrow domains—is important in determining success in college. As many students change their majors throughout their course of study, cross-discipline knowledge can be important. Foreign language skills, for example, can increase success in the international business field. The well-rounded, academically versatile student is an important asset to a college as well as to the changing job market.

As a placement tool, the SAT II: Subject Tests in foreign languages serve the same function as the SAT II: Subject Tests do in other academic areas such as world history, chemistry, or math. Since students are likely to have obtained an advanced level of skill in a foreign language before attending college, these tests provide a standardized and objective assessment of skill level independent of a particular textbook or method of instruction, and irrespective of the school that the student attended or that school's grading standards. SAT II: Subject Tests also provide college faculty with a superior placement tool without using faculty time to develop, administer, or score the tests.

Test Titles Are Selected on Academic Merit

The test titles for the foreign language tests were selected on the basis of their ties to academic settings. French, German, Latin, and Spanish are typically taught in the public high school, with Japanese becoming a more frequent addition to curricula. The SAT Program also recognizes that academic settings extend beyond the public school classroom, and that students of Hebrew, Chinese, and Korean, for example, exist in large numbers in private and heritage schools.

¹Administered with the SAT II: Subject Tests, the English Language Proficiency Test[™] provides students for whom English is not their first language with the opportunity to demonstrate their knowledge of English. It is not, however, considered a foreign language test and will not be discussed here.

Classroom Teachers Determine Test Content

College faculty and secondary school teachers of each language oversee the development of the SAT II foreign language tests, and are selected to reflect an ethnic, gender, and geographic balance. In addition, these teachers represent various sub-specialties within the field. For example, some may focus on innovative methods of teaching listening skills while others may focus on the literature of the relevant language.

These test development committees evaluate test specifications, write many test questions, and approve individual questions and final versions of the tests. Periodically, curriculum surveys are conducted with classroom teachers from across the United States. The results from these surveys are used to update test specifications and to ensure that tests are current with classroom practice.

Academic Target Populations Determine Test Difficulty

The first task of a test development committee is to determine the test's target population, or the group for which the test is intended. Essentially, the target populations for the SAT II: Subject Tests in foreign languages are *students who have studied the language in high schools or equivalent academic settings for two to four years.*

At the beginning of the tests, a questionnaire asks the academic background of the student. *Only students who fit the description of the target population are used to determine the difficulty and suitability of the test questions.* Students who indicate that they have learned the language at home or on extensive stays in foreign countries are excluded when testing experts analyze the difficulty and reliability of the questions. Only students in the target groups are used when placing test scores on the College Board 200 to 800 scale for score reporting.

Test Content Stresses Academic Achievement

Everyday, or conversational, language is notably different from the language experience of the academic classroom. Academic language frequently

focuses on events and topics in a thematic, philosophical, or critical nature, and formal rules of speech are important to student success. Everyday "street" language,² on the other hand, is less concerned with formal speech patterns, and communication about events and topics that the two speakers have in common is usually the goal.³ Since high school classrooms are increasing the amount of instructional time devoted to everyday language, some parts of the test reflect this kind of language; however, *the majority of test content is based on academic classroom language.*

Table 1 demonstrates the extent to which the Spanish language test emphasizes the measurement of academic language (learned in a school setting) over the measurement of everyday language (learned through exposure to language in the community or home).

The SAT II: Subject Tests in foreign languages typically focus on the levels of Intermediate and Advanced language development as characterized by the American Council of Teachers of Foreign Languages (ACTFL). Studies with the English Language Proficiency Test suggest that these levels are equivalent to the level of English language development as demonstrated by native speakers in their freshman year of college.⁴ Using the Spanish language tests as an example, Table 2 demonstrates the percentage of each test that measures language development levels as characterized by ACTFL.

Test Title	Everyday Language	Academic Language
Spanish (reading only)	7%	93%
Spanish with Listening	35%	65%

²See Cummins, J. (1979). *Cognitive/academic language proficiency, linguistic interdependence, the optimum age question and some other matters.* Working Papers on Bilingualism, No. 19. Toronto: Ontario Institute for Studies in Education.

³A simplistic example is a response to the question "Who is it?" when knocking on a door. Academically, the correct response is "It is I." Common street usage is "It's me." Either would be acceptable in an informal setting; only the first is acceptable in an academic setting.

⁴Unpublished summaries of data from two large southern colleges.

TABLE 2
APPROXIMATE PERCENT OF TEST
MEASURING EACH ACTFL LEVEL

Test Title	Intermediate	Advanced	Advanced Plus
Spanish	37%	51%	12%
Spanish with Listening	53%	42%	5%

Assessing Students Who Are Native Speakers of the Language

Language is related to performance on virtually any test. It is used to give test instructions and to write real-world questions in all domains, not just in English or foreign languages. Similarly, language is related to performance in school because instruction in any discipline involves speech and writing. Students who are native speakers of English will generally do better on the SAT I: Verbal Test and the SAT II: Writing Subject Test than students for whom English is a second language. A similar effect is often found on math or science tests that contain longer passages.

Similarly, students who speak a foreign language at home (with other native speakers) will generally do better as a group on a test of that particular language than will students for whom it is a second language. These native-speaking students will obviously have greater familiarity with some phrases and uses of the language than nonnative speakers.

The home or community can influence performance on any test of achievement. For example, some students may participate in intensive summer writing programs, or they may have parents who emphasize science learning. In such instances, students are likely to achieve higher performance on tests (and higher course grades) in writing or chemistry.

It is also true that native speakers of a language do not automatically receive excellent scores on the SAT II foreign language tests. Generally, students completing two or more years of a foreign language attain higher scores on SAT II foreign language tests than do students taking fewer courses. This relationship holds for students who live in homes where that language is spoken as well as students who study the language for the first time in high school. Because the tests emphasize academic language use and intermediate-to-advanced language development levels, students are required to have a better-than-street-level understanding of the language in order to do well.

The College Board recommends that colleges contemplating the use of SAT II: Subject Tests in foreign languages in an admission program consider:

- The emphasis on foreign language learning at the institution.
- The social implications of excluding foreign language from the list of academic subjects allowed for admission.
- The usefulness of the tests for identifying students who might succeed in particular academic subjects (potentially subjects other than foreign languages).
- The added value of the tests for placing students in foreign language classes.