

First Bite out of the “AAPPL.”

By Amanda Robustelli-Price

Introduction

This past school year, I taught French 4 for the first time in my new school. In the 2018-2019 school year, my district was in its first full year of giving the AAPPL test to all level 4 students (after a pilot year with a couple of classes), and thus, this is my first group of students to ever take the AAPPL assessment. My district has now had two years of assessing students for the meeting the requirements of the Seal of Biliteracy. I learned a lot this year. I'd like to share my experiences with others in the hope that they may be helpful to teachers and districts, who like ours, are shifting to a proficiency focus.

What is the AAPPL test?

AAPPL stands for, “ACTFL Assessment of Performance toward Proficiency in Languages®” and is offered through Language Testing International (LTI). Here's information about the test, directly from LTI's website <https://www.languagetesting.com/aappl>: “The ACTFL Assessment of Performance toward Proficiency in Languages (AAPPL) is a performance assessment of standards-based language learning across the three modes of communication (Interpersonal, Presentational, and Interpretive) as defined by the National Standards for Foreign Language Learning. The AAPPL assesses Interpersonal Listening/Speaking, Presentational Writing, Interpretive Reading, and Interpretive Listening, and ratings are assigned according to the ACTFL Performance Descriptors for Language Learners.”

Why did we give the AAPPL test?

Our district chose this test to assess for the language requirement (other than English) for the Seal of Biliteracy and to help us to analyze our progress toward program targets. There are several proficiency-based assessments that share useful data and can be used to show that students have met the language other than English requirement for the Seal of Biliteracy. You can check out a list of these assessments and requirements by visiting <http://www.ctcolt.org/pages/sealofbiliteracy.asp> and clicking, “Eligibility Criteria about the Seal of Biliteracy.”

What is the Seal of Biliteracy?

From the CT COLT brochure about the Seal, “The Seal of Biliteracy is an award given by a school or district, in recognition of students who have studied and attained proficiency in English and at least one other language. It is a recognition of students' academic efforts, to see the tangible benefits of being bilingual and biliterate, and of being prepared for the 21st century.” For more information about the Seal of Biliteracy, please visit: <http://www.ctcolt.org/pages/sealofbiliteracy.asp>

What are our program goals?

In my district, we made our first set of proficiency-based goals two years ago and will continue to modify them based on student performance.

Course Level	Proficiency Goals	Extension Goal
7 th grade, Level 1A	Novice Low-Novice Mid	Novice High
8 th grade, Level 1B	Novice Mid-Novice High	Intermediate Low
High School Level 1	Novice Mid-Novice High	Intermediate Low
High School Level 2	Novice High-Intermediate Low	Intermediate Mid
High School Level 3	Intermediate Low-Intermediate Mid	Intermediate High
High School Level 4	Intermediate Mid	Intermediate High
High School AP	Intermediate Mid-Intermediate High	Advanced Low +
High School ECE	Intermediate Mid-Intermediate High	Advanced Low +

What did I do to prepare students for the test?

I prepared the students for the test in a variety of ways. Most importantly, I worked diligently to improve students' abilities to communicate in French, always focusing on proficiency. I looked at our program goals and worked to design tasks that were engaging, tied to authentic resources, and encompassed all modes of communication. Our district uses rubrics for assessments that are based ACTFL guidelines, which helped me to focus on key areas such as vocabulary, sentence structure, comprehensibility, and language control. Some specific strategies I used included:

- I strived to create an immersive French environment, where 90% or more of our interactions in class were in the target language. For example, I carefully planned how to write and display directions for student comprehension (which often

included visuals), incorporated routines and procedures to facilitate the use of French, and carefully designed posters and word walls for the classroom walls.

- I incorporated authentic resources into every unit design and wove them into many lessons. Scaffolded tasks included a focus on both reading and listening strategies.
- I regularly asked for student feedback on ways that I could support their use of the target language in the classroom, and incorporated student recommendations into daily practice.

What types of practice tests did we do?

I used the practice AAPPL assessment (<https://www.language-testing.com/aappl2-demo>) with my students, so that they would know what to expect from the test itself. This was helpful, although students were disappointed because the practice tests do not include answers or scores. In addition, each of my units throughout the year includes multiple authentic resources, and interpersonal speaking tasks, interpersonal writing tasks, and presentational writing and/or tasks.

What work did the teachers and administration do in advance of the test?

In my school, we were lucky that our department coordinator registered students for the test, and printed out individual labels, which were attached to notecards, with their access information for the test. In advance of the assessment, our department coordinator also worked with the district technology team to ensure that all technology components would work during the test itself, which they did. We used our language lab for the testing.

How and when did my students take the assessment?

Students took the assessment over a few classes during class time only. Our initial aim was for students to take two assessments per block scheduling period, for a total of two classes (which for us is about 160 minutes). We did find that some students took longer than others to take the exam, so we gave them additional time to complete the test. There were a few stragglers at the end (due to absences, field trips, or just longer focus on the test) who ended up finishing the test on laptops in the classroom, in the back, during typical class time.

How did the assessment process go for them?

The test itself is very user friendly and easy to follow and take. On the written tasks, there is a button for students to add accents, which was useful. During piloting last year, we found that students were self-conscious if they did the speaking at different times, so on the second day of testing, we asked students to do the speaking all at the same time, which seemed to reduce anxiety.

How long did it take for test results to come in?

Test sections were graded as they were completed, with reading and listening having the shortest turnaround time, which was typically less than a day. The grading time for the other sections varied widely, from the same afternoon to almost a week in some cases.

How did my students perform?

Of my fifteen students who took the test, two of them received the score of 13 or higher on all four of the tests, and thus are eligible to earn the Seal of Biliteracy (as long as they meet their English graduation requirements as well). Four of my students missed 13 in only one test section and will retake that part again next year. Four other students earned 13 or higher on two tests. When I compare the scores in French this year to the students who took the assessment last year, I do see a slight uptick in overall performance, which I believe is a result of department-wide changes in assessment and instruction. I hope to see the same trend in the coming years.

What did I learn from the results of the assessment?

Within my own class, I was able to see that student areas of strength were the interpretive reading and interpretive listening sections. The lowest scores, with five students performing in the novice range, were for interpretive listening and speaking. I need to think more deeply about the productive skills and specifically about the types of activities I am doing, as well as the feedback that I am giving students about their performance.

Most importantly, the AAPPL scores have provided an excellent analytical tool for discussing instruction throughout our department. Our district coordinator for World Languages can see and analyze the trends of performance in a variety of ways, such as through the categories of the test or through instructor. For example, we discovered that certain teachers had significantly higher scores in certain areas of the test: Interpretive listening, presentational writing, and interpretive reading. My own scores did not show a clear pattern like this. I am excited to learn from my colleagues who exhibit strengths in instructional practices that can help me to improve my own instruction in certain areas, and thus student outcomes.

How did I share the results with my students?

AAPPL tests include an individual report, where students were able to both see and analyze their results. The report includes tips for moving to the next proficiency level. (Interested in seeing a sample score report? Visit: <https://www.languagetesting.com/aapl-scores>.) I printed out the individual student reports, and had students complete an analysis of their score and of my performance throughout the year— what went well in preparation for the exam across different categories, and what could be done better in the future. Student feedback about classroom instruction was insightful. For example, I learned that I need to work harder to include different accents from the francophone world in the interpretive listening tasks.

What did I learn about the structure of the test?

Here's a quick primer on the four sections of the test:

- **Interpretive reading:** Students read a variety of texts and complete tasks such as matching key ideas with pictures or words.
- **Interpretive listening:** Same as the reading task, but with texts they heard.
- **Presentational writing:** Students responded to a series of prompts, which became progressively more complex. Here's a prompt from the practice test:

Task 1 of 3 Accessibility

Please write about four friends here at school. Write their names and say why you are friends with each one of them. Write at least two sentences about each one.

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- **Interpersonal speaking and listening:** Students were able to listen to a video prompt two times, then had a set time period to respond to the prompt.

I was really interested by the prompts given for the speaking and writing portions of the test, which I found to be broader in scope than those I typically give in class. These prompts have made me rethink what types of questions I am asking students throughout the year.

What are next steps for students?

Students who want to retake sections whose scores did not meet the non-English language requirements for the Seal of Biliteracy can retake the AAPPL test, at the earliest, three months later. This is relevant especially for students who took the test in their junior year or earlier, who would still have time to qualify for the Seal of Biliteracy before graduating.

What would I change for next year?

Next year, I am going to make a few changes, such as:

- I will work to increase the variety of the francophone world included in our authentic resources, especially video and audio clips.
- I want to connect feedback not just to a rubric level but also to a proficiency level and want to work harder to share with students what they need to do to move to the next level.
- I am going to incorporate more of the video-style speaking prompts into our class practice, where I or another speaking asks a question, students can listen twice, and then they must record their response.
- I am going to rethink assessments and the types of prompts I am giving to students.

As is the culture in our department, we will also continue to update the curriculum and daily class practice through meaningful discussions and data analysis.

In Conclusion

My first experience with the AAPPL test was positive, and I learned a lot this year about test logistics and format. Through departmental discussions, sharing of practices, changes in curriculum, and a clear focus on student proficiency, I do believe that, over time, I will continue to improve my teaching skills to give students such an important skill: The ability to communicate meaningfully in another language.