

## Does the MLAT help the FCO hire the right people?

### Predictive validity of the MLAT to identify British diplomats with the aptitude to learn hard languages

Diplomats need to learn languages to effectively engage in their host countries. The Foreign and Commonwealth Office (FCO) uses the Modern Language Aptitude Test (MLAT) to help select those most likely to succeed in learning hard languages.

#### What is the Modern Language Aptitude Test (MLAT)?

Measures aptitude to learn a foreign language. Predicts differences in the rate at which language learning can take place. Aptitude is a latent trait that is relatively stable and resistant to training. The test has remained unchanged since 1939.

#### Scores:

- ▲ Strong potential for achievement in any language (100 and above)
- Potential for achievement in any language, but might have difficulty reaching highest levels in hard languages (70-100)
- Potential for achievement in West European and class 4 or 5 languages (25-70)
- Unlikely to have potential for achievement in hard languages; might take longer than normal time to achieve required level even in West European languages (24 or below)

#### Test description:

- Part 1: Number learning in an unknown language (e.g. 'bat' is 'low')
- Part 2: Phonetic symbols (e.g. 'bat') and its sound
- Part 3: Recognition of words in a reduced form (e.g. 'restrain' for 'restraint')
- Part 4: Selecting words with same grammatical function
- Part 5: Memory of English message (e.g. 'bat' for 'bat')

#### Aptitude components tested:

- phonetic coding: capacity to hear and retain unfamiliar sounds
- grammatical sensitivity: capacity to identify word functions in sentences
- inductive language learning: capacity to extrapolate rules for examples
- associative memory: capacity for rote learning

#### Target Language Use (TLU) for British diplomats:

- **Political:** ease with / influence the host government
- **Corporate:** support British national interests
- **Prosperity:** support UK businesses and overseas investors
- **Core diplomatic language skills:**
  - Reading government reports and media
  - Speaking at events and negotiations
  - Listening to briefings and media
- **C1 or C2 Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR) level:**
  - Writing and translation as required for some posts/speaker slots
  - Up to 85 languages taught and tested
  - 500-600 language posts/speaker slots around the world

#### FCO training and testing programme

- MLAT part of the final selection process for entry to the FCO, from 2017
- MLAT is a criteria in selection for an overseas post, particularly hard languages
- Training time to achieve C1 (from A0) dependent on difficulty of the language:
  - Arabic: 20 months
  - Mandarin: 22 months
  - French: 8 months
- Milestone tests throughout training
- Final examination before departure or within 6 months after arrival at post

#### All Languages



#### Arabic



#### Mandarin Chinese



#### French



#### What do these graphs tell us?

- TLA = Target Level Attainment (Final exam)
- Nuts: small data samples
- Green indicates exam taken and passed.
- Red indicates exam not passed or not yet taken for operational reasons
- MLAT is not the only deciding factor to appointing a diplomat to train for a hard language speaker slot
- MLAT rated A or B is an advantage to learning a language.
- MLAT rated C or D does not mean you cannot pass at C1 even for a hard language
- MLAT rated D is a disadvantage to learning <https://www.gov.uk/government/organisations/foreign-and-commonwealth-office>

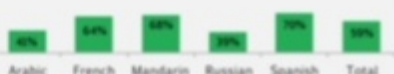
#### Language attainment levels

(% pass rates)



#### Priority language attainment rates - % of job

holders who have passed their exam (Sept 2017)



#### Questions and discussion

- How much weighting should be given to the MLAT in recruiting into the FCO?
- What weighting should be given to the MLAT in appointing diplomats into speaker slot roles overseas? Some diplomats with low MLAT scores may do well because of other factors such as experience, knowledge, plurilingualism, and non-cognitive attributes such as motivation, persistence and grit.
- Should learning time be reduced for students with high MLAT scores? Should pass rates for MLAT sections influence lesson planning?
- Diplomats who marginally fail milestone tests or the final examination receive remedial training and re-examination dates. What are the consequences to the FCO and the individual of putting a diplomat with a low MLAT into hard language training?
- How do other variables impact language attainment (equivalency of tests, quality of teaching, availability of teaching materials or special learning needs such as dyslexia)?
- Is the MLAT a good predictor of ability to reach C1 and C2 levels, or only effective in predicting successful early language learning?
- Are there better alternatives to the MLAT that would help in recruitment and subsequent internal hiring decisions?

#### References:

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We would thank you to share feedback from the British Council. We will monitor and respond to it in due time.