

**The Use of the Modern Language Aptitude Test in the Assessment  
of Foreign Language Learning Disability—What's at Stake?**

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## I. INTRODUCTION

In this paper we will discuss five ethical concerns related to the use of the Modern Language Aptitude Test (MLAT) in the diagnosis of foreign language learning disability. In this introduction, we will first provide some background information on the MLAT. Then, we will describe the use of the MLAT in learning disability assessment and introduce the five ethical concerns that we have identified. After that, we will elaborate on the definitions of “language aptitude” and “learning disability” in order to facilitate the subsequent discussion of the ethical issues.

The MLAT is a well-known, commercially-available assessment instrument that measures a person’s probable ability to learn a foreign language. It was developed in the 1950s by John Carroll and Stanley Sapon based on a 5-year research project at Harvard and was initially normed on about 5000 students in U.S. high school, college, and government language programs. Some of the results from these experimental administrations are reported in Carroll (1981) and in the MLAT Manual. The general conclusion from these early trials was that the MLAT was a potentially very useful instrument for predicting success at foreign language learning, especially if other relevant considerations such as motivation, attitude, effort, and quality of instruction were taken into account.

For more than 40 years now, the main uses of the MLAT have been in the selection of students for foreign language study and in the placement of students in programs that have curricular options such as streaming and matching, uses that are described in some detail in the MLAT Manual. The potential diagnostic value of the test was also recognized early on, because different parts of the test deal with different aspects of language ability such as phonetics, phonology, grammar, and rote memory. Guidance counselors have used scores from different parts of the test in building profiles of students’ strengths and weaknesses and in advising them how best to attack their curriculum (cf. Ehrman, 1996; Wesche, 1981).

Relatively recently, there has been an increase in the use of the MLAT in the diagnosis of individuals who claim to have a learning disability (LD) that severely impairs their learning of foreign languages. Contingent on the outcome of such a diagnosis is eligibility for accommodations in foreign language courses, and, in some cases, outright waivers from the foreign language requirement. It is this high-stakes use of the MLAT that we are concerned with in this paper. The five associated ethical questions that we have identified are as follows:

1. *Is it ethical to grant some students a waiver of the FL requirement, while others are forced to take a foreign language against their will?*
2. *Is it ethical to use the test to determine whether a FL requirement waiver should be granted when a student can intentionally fail the test?*
3. *Is it ethical to force students with a FL learning disability to take and fail a foreign language one or more times before granting a waiver?*

4. *Is it ethical to exclude a measure of language aptitude when a student is being evaluated for learning disabilities, particularly if the student is petitioning specifically for an exemption from a FL requirement?*
5. *How can the test publisher market and sell the test in an ethical way, knowing that its use is open to abuse?*

Central to a discussion of these issues is an understanding of the terms “language aptitude” and “learning disability,” and so we will define and clarify these notions now. Carroll (1981) explicates the idea of language aptitude with several interesting statements. He says, for example, that “. . .in approaching a particular learning task or program, the individual may be thought of as possessing some current state of capability of learning that task. . .” and “That capability is presumed to depend on some combination of more or less enduring characteristics of the individual (Thus, *aptitude* as conceived of here does not include motivation or interest; these latter aspects have to be separately evaluated.)” (p. 84). Carroll goes on to claim that language aptitude is “relatively fixed” and “relatively hard to modify.” Furthermore, he suggests “that foreign language aptitude is not exactly the same as what is commonly called ‘intelligence,’ not even ‘verbal intelligence,’ for foreign language aptitude measures do not share the same patterns of correlations with foreign language achievement as intelligence and academic ability measures have. . .” (p. 86). In addition, Carroll emphasizes that “people differ widely in their capacity to learn foreign languages easily and rapidly” (p. 97) and that “aptitude should be defined in terms of prediction of rate of learning” (p. 91).

On the basis of extensive correlational analyses, Carroll (1961) proposed that foreign language aptitude consisted of four components: phonetic coding ability, grammatical sensitivity, rote memory, and inductive language learning ability. The first three of these components are tapped by the MLAT. Extensive norming and validity data for the test are presented in the MLAT Manual based on administrations of the test to roughly 2900 students in U.S. high schools, colleges, and universities. Carroll (1981) summarizes the validity data as follows: “the predictive validity coefficients for foreign language aptitude batteries in representative samples are typically in the range .4 to .6 against suitable criterion measures of success in foreign language attainment, such as final course grades, objective foreign language attainment tests, or instructors’ estimates of language learning ability. . .It can be said, in fact, that foreign language success is more easily and better predicted, on the basis of aptitude test scores, than most other types of achievement.” (p. 96).

Turning now to the notion of “learning disability,” we have somewhat less to say, partly because we are not experts in the field of learning disabilities or special education, and partly because there is a lack of consensus on many aspects of the notion, including how many learning disabilities exist, what their basis is, and how they should be diagnosed. However, according to Kavale (1993), there is at least a fair amount of agreement on some components of learning disabilities, “one of which is the presence of academic deficits (e.g., in reading, writing, math), which are the most overt manifestations of underlying information-processing problems” (p. 520). Cohen (1983) states that “it is a diagnosis primarily made by exclusion and discrepancy” and explains that, “Most clinicians and researchers accept the notion that there are

neuropsychologically based cognitive deficits which interfere with learning. In order to call such a deficit a learning disability it is essential to determine that the following factors are not causing the cognitive deficit(s): psychological conflict, mental retardation, inadequate educational opportunities, environmental disadvantage, sensory impairment, or neurological disease (p. 178).

Thus, the documentation of a learning disability can be a very extensive process that incorporates results from tests of general intelligence, academic achievement, and processing skills as well as a comprehensive diagnostic summary that covers a wide range of background information that might be considered relevant to a clinical assessment. When we look at samples of university policies in the next section, we will note that a measure of language aptitude is sometimes included in this process, and sometimes not.

## II. FIVE ETHICAL QUESTIONS REGARDING THE USE OF THE MLAT IN THE DIAGNOSIS OF FOREIGN LANGUAGE LEARNING DISABILITY

### **1. Is it ethical to grant some students a waiver of the FL requirement, while others are forced to take a foreign language against their will?**

Ethical problem #1 is created by the very idea of granting an accommodation, a substitute, or a waiver of the foreign language requirement by an institution of higher education (IHE). An accommodation is any special service or assistance that the institution may provide to the student who has a FLL disability. Scott and Maglitz (2000) have described the kinds of accommodation that may be provided. A substitute course or courses may be allowed if the IHE does not provide adequate accommodations to effectively address the student's educational needs. Some of the benefits gained from foreign language study may be gained from the substitute. A waiver is simply the exemption of the student from meeting the foreign language requirement. From an ethical perspective, the awarding of a substitute or a waiver may appear to be discriminatory, since it means that all students are not held to the same requirements, and not all get to benefit equally from the IHE's academic requirements. Accommodations provide for inclusion of students in the full academic program, including its requirements. However, students who receive the substitute or waiver do not complain about not being included, because most would prefer to receive a substitute or waiver than to continue having to meet the academic requirement.

In the United States, an answer to the ethical concern is found in federal and state law. Title 5, section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 requires institutions of higher education to address the needs of applicants and students with disabilities. The legislation goes beyond physical disabilities. For instance, regarding academic requirements it says, "an institution shall make such modifications to its academic requirements as are necessary to ensure that such requirements do not discriminate or have the effect of discriminating, on the basis of handicap, against a qualified handicapped applicant or student."

A learning disability may be considered a handicap. The federal government defines a learning disability as "a disorder in one or more of the basic psychological processes involved in understanding or in using language, spoken or written, that may

manifest itself in an imperfect ability to listen, think, speak, read, write, spell, or to do mathematical calculations, including conditions such as perceptual disabilities, brain injury, minimal brain dysfunction, dyslexia, and developmental aphasia." (United States Code (USC) Title 20, chapter 33, subchapter 1, section 1401.) As can be seen, many of the skills and processes included in the definition relate to language. As a language aptitude measure, the MLAT claims to measure the examinee's ability to learn and process language. While the MLAT does not purport that only certain individuals can learn a language, it does claim that differences in language learning success are generally linked to differences in language learning aptitude.

Prior to 1990, few universities interpreted the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 as requiring them to provide special accommodations to students who claim a foreign language learning disability. This is because the 1973 act only applied to programs in institutions of higher education that received direct federal support. However, the American's with Disabilities Act (ADA) of 1990, extended the impact of this earlier act by elevating the requirement for accommodations to the level of a civil right, at least in the workplace and in workplace training.

The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) of 1997 further reinforced the ADA. IDEA provides federal support to help institutions meet the expenses incurred in providing accommodations for students ages 3-21 who have 13 different categories of disabilities. One of these categories is "specific learning disabilities." While this support goes mainly to elementary and secondary schools, these students are now rapidly entering universities, where they are demanding similar accommodations. Parents and other advocates of students with learning disabilities tend to believe that students with a learning disability should enjoy the same rights to adequate and appropriate accommodations as they did while enrolled in school at the secondary level.

The above referenced federal law, combined with the growing demands of students with disabilities and their advocates, who are often wealthy and politically powerful, provides an answer to ethical concern 1 stated above. Secondary level students with bonafide and verifiable learning disabilities have a legal right to an appropriate accommodation. At the tertiary level, the same conclusion is held by many, but not all. As a result, if an appropriate accommodation cannot be provided, then the IHE may grant the student permission to take an alternate or substitute course or courses, or the IHE may grant a waiver. The legal requirements, combined with the threat of legal action, remove the concern from the realm of ethics. Ethics and law are widely recognized as two different realms. For example, courts do not concern themselves with ethics, only with determining if an individual or an organization has complied with the law. So, what at first glance may appear to be an ethical concern has been removed from the realm of ethics by legal requirements and by the fear of legal action.

**2. Is it ethical to use the test to determine whether a FL requirement waiver should be granted when a student can intentionally fail the test?**

This is reminiscent of the “false- beginner” problem that many universities have when incoming students intentionally fail the foreign language placement exam in hopes of being placed into first-year language classes and bolstering their grade point averages. One way around that is not to offer credit for first-year language classes, and/or to offer incentives for higher placement. In the case of ethical concern #2, one might begin by reminding the students of the benefits of foreign language study: some proficiency in the target language, a better understanding of the people who speak that language, or perhaps an edge on the job market, or an advantage in getting into a good graduate program.

A long-term solution might involve “early detection.” A language aptitude measure such as the MLAT-Elementary, a version of the MLAT for children in grades 3-6, could be given more routinely to children who exhibit language learning difficulties early on. Since language aptitude is supposedly fairly stable throughout one’s life, a measurement obtained early would be, in some sense, good for life, though more realistically it would provide corroborating evidence for a low MLAT score earned as an adult.

Another approach is to employ a number of safeguards. Goodman, Freed, and McManus (1990) suggest, “One means of securing full cooperation is to inform students that since the examiner is searching for a particular profile of strengths and weaknesses unknown to the examinee, the most likely means of revealing a disability is to do one’s best” (p. 133). The student may or may not buy that. However, the idea of looking for patterns, or consistency, is a common strategy. At the University of Pennsylvania, for example, the MLAT is used but not required. One thing a consultant in a disabilities services office might look for would be difficulty understanding spoken language, combined with evidence of auditory processing weakness as revealed by the Woodcock-Johnson battery. Also, since students are often interviewed as well, any possible motivation to intentionally fail might be revealed to a counselor. A counselor might even ask the student directly if they did their best on the test. In addition, before being considered for a waiver, most schools require that the student document a history of failures in foreign language study, with no successes (while performing adequately in other academic areas). Goodman, Freed, and McManus (1990) report that, at the University of Pennsylvania, “all students without a documented history of prior learning disability must pursue the foreign language requirement (four courses and a proficiency exam). Only after failure in a course and on the recommendation of the instructor are they eligible for foreign language exemption review” (p. 140). The intent of this policy leads us directly into ethical concern #3.

### **3. Is it ethical to force students with a FL learning disability to take and fail a foreign language one or more times before granting a waiver?**

Schwarz (1997) and others have implied that some LD students are being treated unfairly by being required to try, and fail, language courses before being considered for a waiver. This is an especially common concern at universities, which do not have to waive the foreign language requirement, nor allow course substitutions, if the faculty body that sets academic standards considers the requirement to be an essential part of the academic curriculum (Guckenberger et al. vs. Boston University Trustees et al. 1996). Complicating this issue is a lack of confidence in the whole process of diagnosing LDs.

Recall that one reason that students are forced to try a language course is to corroborate the initial diagnosis by demonstrating failure. At Yale, the MLAT is considered “one more perspective,” but not necessarily a central piece of the diagnosis. A low MLAT score alone is not considered strong evidence of a foreign language learning disability. Sparks and Javorsky (2000) strongly voice their opinion that “such uses of the MLAT are psychometrically indefensible” (p. 647). We would agree that the MLAT should not be used in absolute isolation, but the other factors to consider do not necessarily have to include demonstration of yet another failure. There are many sources of evidence that can be brought to bear on each case. For example, the “Learning Disability Documentation Guidelines” at Columbia University Office of Disability Services is quite detailed in requiring standardized scores to document aptitude (i.e., a “complete intellectual assessment is required...preferably utilizing the Wechsler Adult Intelligence Scale-Revised”), academic achievement (e.g., The Woodcock-Johnson Psycho-Educational Battery Revised), processing skills, a detailed clinical summary, and the MLAT. Other schools, such as Dartmouth, Yale, and the University of Pennsylvania have similarly detailed policies.

Pending developments that might eventually engender greater confidence in language aptitude tests and in the overall diagnosis of foreign language learning disability, schools might consider the deeper intent of their foreign language requirements. The University of Wisconsin-Madison seems to have a sensible solution in offering a “foreign language substitution package,” which “is designed to fulfill the faculty’s intention in requiring foreign language as a part of the college curriculum. Specifically, the Foreign Language Substitution Package provides—as does the foreign language requirement—students information about the structure of a language as well as the literature and culture of the people using that language.”

In any event, that is one solution to ethical concern #3. Yet, a deeper issue of validity remains, and that brings us to ethical concern #4.

**4. Is it ethical to exclude a measure of language aptitude when a student is being evaluated for learning disabilities, particularly if the student is petitioning specifically for an exemption from a FL requirement?**

Ethical concern #4 confronts the real validity issue. First, we must sort out the confusion that exists between other learning disabilities that impair foreign language learning, such as auditory processing weakness or dyslexia, and what might be thought of as a foreign language learning disability in its own right, one related to Carroll’s notion of language aptitude. In the former case, it is questionable that it is even appropriate to give the MLAT, because it was designed to assess foreign language aptitude, not other, broader kinds of aptitude or disability. However, clearly the case has been made that there is a special cognitive basis to the language aptitude construct, and therefore a special foreign language learning disability almost certainly does exist. If that reasoning is accepted, then it follows that a measure of language aptitude is crucial in the diagnosis of a foreign language learning disability. Intelligence and other kinds of cognitive measures would not be good substitutes, although they might be used as additional evidence to provide a more thorough diagnostic evaluation. A summary statement in the

MLAT Manual reads, “Research on the MLAT has several times made it possible to compare the validity of the MLAT with intelligence tests or with other predictors of success in foreign language learning. The comparison has nearly always favored the MLAT” (p. 25).

Data reported by Sparks and Javorsky (2000) is also consistent with the proposal that there is a specific disability related to foreign language learning. They report that not all students with the LD label have difficulty in FL classes, and somewhat conversely, not all students who have trouble in foreign language classes have a learning disability (but they do tend to have lower native language skills and lower MLAT scores). (see Sparks and Javorsky, 2000, p. 646)

This proposal, that there is a disability specific to foreign language learning, could potentially be countered by the suggestion that since language aptitude is relative (i.e. people learn at different rates), a low aptitude score does not really represent an inability to learn in the sense of real disability, which is characterized by an impairment so severe that it “blocks” learning. In fact, a quote from the MLAT Manual itself might be cited as support for that argument: “The MLAT does *not* claim to say whether an individual has a “language block” or some inherited disposition or trait which will prevent him or her from learning a foreign language. As far as is known, any individual who is able to use his mother tongue in the ordinary affairs of everyday life can also acquire similar competence in a second language, given time and opportunity” (p. 23).

The above paragraph is an argument against the idea of a foreign language learning disability. However, the fact that language aptitude is a relative concept does not really distinguish it from other disabilities. People who are legally blind are not necessarily completely blind. People who are hearing impaired are not necessarily completely deaf. Actually, the suggestion that everyone can learn given enough time has pretty clear implications both for accommodations (i.e. give them more time and pace the instruction) and for waivers (i.e. if it’s not possible to provide enough time, then grant the waiver or “substitution package”). For several years now, the Public Service Commission of Canada has used the MLAT to place French language learners into “streams” that progress at various rates (Wesche, 1981). It appears that all students can succeed if placed in appropriate tracks. Obviously, that is a fairly ideal situation. At many schools the curriculum is more rigid; therefore, counselors and advisors should take the “speed” of the curriculum into account when deciding whether to grant waivers. For example, at a school such as Yale, language classes proceed at a very rapid pace. It therefore would not seem reasonable to force a student who scored at the 5th percentile on the MLAT to try to keep up foreign language study at Yale.

In sum, the concept of foreign language learning disability needs to take into account both the rate of ability to learn, on the part of the learner, and the typical pace of the instruction that the learner will be given. Furthermore, while there are still questions about the validity of using a language aptitude test in this way, so too are there serious doubts about omitting such a measure. Thus, there is a clear need for related research and for dissemination of the results. We suggest that the test publisher has a role to play here, which brings us to our final ethical concern.

**5. How can the test publisher market and sell the test in an ethical way, knowing that its use is open to abuse?**

Most tests, particularly off-the-shelf tests, are open to abuse to varying degrees. When it comes to the identification of a disability for purposes of obtaining a waiver, the MLAT is no different from other tests used in the learning disabilities (LD) arena. We believe that the publisher of a test used for this purpose must be sensitive to the ethical dilemma that the use presents, and that the publisher must be proactive in addressing these ethical concerns. If the publisher acts accordingly, then the ethical burden is alleviated. Here are some of the measures taken by SLTI to prevent misuse and to ensure the most appropriate use of the MLAT.

1. Test security. When an off-the-shelf test is used for moderate or high stakes purposes, test security becomes a major concern. Not only will professionals want to purchase it, but examinees will too in order to learn how to score high or low on it, depending on what their goal may be. For a publisher, there are far more opportunities to sell to examinees than to professionals who want to make a legitimate use of the test. In the case of the MLAT, we require each purchaser to identify their professional affiliation, and we make them sign a pledge to maintain test security and to use the test in accordance with APA Standards. Whenever we are uncertain about a new purchaser, we email or call the purchaser requesting additional information on why they want to purchase the test. We have returned several checks as well as payments made over the internet because it became clear that the person purchasing the test was an examinee who wanted to "prepare" for its formal administration. We have placed a sample test consisting of 25 items on our website, so that examinees wanting information on the test can see the nature of the items and sections, and therefore have no legitimate excuse to try to purchase the actual test.

2. Research on test use. The publisher of a test whose use is subject to abuse carries a special burden to keep up with what users are doing, in order to identify and prevent inappropriate or unethical test uses. Even though this is a very small testing program, we periodically survey the users, in order to better understand how they are using the test, the other measures they are using with it, and the actions that are taken as a result of performance on the test. We maintain a file on each user, where we describe what we know about how they use the test. We periodically review these files in order to synthesize information, and we sometimes call users and interview them over the phone in order to learn what they are doing and to engage them in a discussion of good test interpretation and practice.

3. Research on legal requirements. In order to better counsel potential test users, we are studying the literature on legal requirements and "guidance" published by government agencies. We find this literature hard to understand, as do the test users. The lack of clarity and specificity is one reason why there is considerable disagreement over what should be done after a probable foreign language learning disability is identified.

4. Information dissemination. We believe that a publisher of a test in the LD arena has a special obligation to educate test users about the issues surrounding the uses of the test. We also believe that we should keep up with research on the test being done in the field. For these reasons, we scan books and research journals to identify relevant studies and reviews of the literature. We use this information to revise the test manual periodically. The most recent revision was published in 2002, with an earlier revision published in 2000. We also give serious, objective presentations at conferences like this one. We

hope these presentations not only inform test users but also stimulate a discussion of appropriate and inappropriate uses of the test in the field. We keep the website updated as well, so that users can go there for the latest information on special issues and concerns.

5. Qualifications. We try to emphasize the need for qualified individuals to interpret the test scores, and for those involved in deciding what to do with test scores to be familiar with the literature on the test and on the construct it measures, so that they will make informed decisions regarding examinees. In the LD field, it is very important that the assessment be complete and that the interpretations and consequences of the scores be the result of reasonable, rational, and discerning thought by relevant professionals.

6. Multiple measures. As indicated earlier, we support the use of multiple-measures to construct a diagnostic profile of the examinee, rather than reliance on the MLAT as the sole indicator of a disability.

### III. CONCLUSIONS

In considering these five ethical concerns, we found ourselves wondering how we could help to “solve” these problems. Hence, there was much discussion of validity, because we are language testers, and validity is something we know how to talk about; and there was even one whole section on publisher responsibilities, because practicality is also something we know about. Clearly, validity must be considered. What if the diagnosis is wrong? Then non-LD students, falsely diagnosed as LD, would be denied the benefits of pursuing the foreign language requirement, while truly learning disabled students would be denied the substitutions or waivers they desperately need. For some individuals, this could mean the difference between graduating, and not graduating, so much is at stake. We also noted that ethics and law are different realms; what is legal is not always what is ethical. As language testers we would hope to influence the law by informing it. We note, too, that this responsibility will not be easy to meet, as we are dealing with an interdisciplinary matter that involves many specialized domains.

Somehow we need to know enough about the related areas to communicate with a wide range of professionals—guidance counselors, school psychologists, clinical neurologists, our fellow language testers, and others. We encourage additional research on language aptitude, as well as its relationship to other factors that influence language learning. We also encourage the development of different forms of the MLAT, and other language aptitude measures. We also recommend “early detection” with the use of an instrument like the MLAT-Elementary. As the MLAT becomes better accepted for determining whether a student qualifies for an accommodation or waiver of the foreign language requirement, the stakes might well rise, as the number of people tested would likely increase.

In closing, we feel that the notion of foreign language learning disability is defensible, and that the MLAT contributes essential information to its diagnosis. We further believe that, although research and validation efforts should be ongoing, if the diagnosis is comprehensive, and if all of the safeguards we recommend are in place, then this use of this test is ethical.

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