Proposal for revising evaluation of doctoral student language competency in French and German

[Draft]

The current test. The competency this exam measures is considered essential for a student’s success, and failure may have serious consequences for advancement towards a degree (as well as financial implications). The Humanities faculty who prepare and grade the graduate language exams, and who frequently advise the students who take it, observe endemic problems with the current test. We propose a revised measure of language competency for graduate students. The concerns that compel this proposal include:

• It is not an accurate or comprehensive measure.
  250 words of translated prose are inadequate to determine a skill level, other than in exceptionally strong or exceptionally weak efforts. In the majority of cases we must rely on suggestions of competency based on scant and inconclusive evidence.

• It is not a current measure.
  Resources for research in another language have changed. The “hard copy” dictionary is no longer the tool used for conducting research and translating a text.

• Students are rarely trained in translation skills.
  Competency in a language does not necessarily entail a comparable translation skills. Students who take 3 or 4 semesters of standard college-level language may be able to communicate in speaking and writing and will have acquired some cultural competency, but these skills are not the same as those needed for translation.

• We have little support for students with insufficient skills.
  We currently offer no instruction that teaches the specific skills needed to pass the test. As noted above, taking a regular language class will improve language skills, but not hone those needed specifically for this test.

• Students’ needs and aspirations are diverse.
  A one-size-fits-all evaluation does not take into account differences in student needs. A student who wishes to take a course or present research in another language, or who wishes to be competitive for a grant (Fulbright, Chateaubriand, DAAD), has different professional needs from a student who wishes to read, understand, and translate written work.

• There is no recognition of superior language skills.
  There is no exemption for students who are heritage speakers (native or near-native competency from family ties or living/study experience abroad) or who may otherwise demonstrate superior language skills. A completed undergraduate German major at an accredited university by a student qualified for acceptance into an Eastman PhD program represents a far more convincing measure of competency than our cursory 250-word exercise, yet we only honor the latter.
Proposed revisions to the current assessment of language competency for doctoral students

We propose three ways to fulfill the requirement. Measures #1 and #3 are similar in structure to those used for other language requirements at our school (undergraduate and graduate voice major, etc.), but in most cases are more rigorous. Measure #2 is a new initiative tailored to the specific needs of certain students for scholarly research.

1. **Pass a fourth-semester (or higher) college-level class with a minimum grade of B+.**

   • Focus on oral and written proficiency, including the cultural context of language production. Appropriate for students who wish to live, teach, and/or study in a French or German-speaking country. Essential for grant applications to these countries (*Fulbright, Chateaubriand, DAAD*).

   • At Eastman, this course is French/German “202G”. Students with little or no prior language instruction will need to take prerequisite courses (101G, 102G, and/or 201G).

   • If taken at another university, it must have been within the last 5 years, the college or university must be accredited, and the class must be comparable to the Eastman’s “202G” in level and scope. Eastman language courses adhere to a standard curriculum sequence shared by many colleges and universities. Students may be asked to submit the syllabus for the course for approval.

2. **Pass a reading knowledge/translation class with a grade of B+ or higher.**

   • At Eastman these courses will need to be developed.

   • It will be a 3-credit 200-level course (209/209G?)

   • A comparable course from another university may be considered as an appropriate substitution, but it must have similar content and scope. Students must obtain pre-approval to guarantee the course will qualify before taking it.

3. **Demonstrate superior language skills**

   • Native speakers

   • Students who have a significant record of advanced coursework or scholarly accomplishment in the target language. Undergraduate majors and minors will qualify.