CHALLENGE

The U.S. government has an urgent and growing need for foreign language professionals with high-level proficiency, but few learners who begin after age 12 are able to reach these levels.

Identifying individuals with high language aptitude helps focus language hiring and training resources on those who are most likely to succeed at language learning. In addition, analysts with a known high language aptitude can be selected to work with difficult critical languages, such as Chinese and Arabic.

To this end, CASL researchers have developed the High-Level Language Aptitude Battery (Hi-LAB), a composite set of tests that measures cognitive and perceptual abilities designed to predict aptitude for learning foreign language to advanced levels. Using innovative measures to identify high-level language learners, CASL’s Hi-LAB assists with the selection, hiring, and training of top language professionals.

FINDINGS

Unlike currently used aptitude tests, which predict success in the early stages of language learning, CASL’s Hi-LAB uses innovative behavioral tasks to predict ultimate attainment.

In a validation study involving more than 500 military and civilian personnel from multiple U.S. agencies, Hi-LAB was able to distinguish highly successful language learners from other individuals. Hi-LAB was most effective in identifying high attainment in listening proficiency, but favorable results were also found for identifying high attainment in reading. The Hi-LAB validation study findings will be published in Language Learning in fall 2013.

CASL researchers have also developed a scoring rubric that can generate an individualized aptitude profile report for each test taker. This report provides a snapshot of the learner’s potential for high-level language learning and can be used to support tailored training.

UPCOMING WORK

CASL researchers plan to conduct a long-term study in an operational environment to clarify how Hi-LAB’s measured aptitude traits predict differences in language-learning outcomes, such as official foreign language proficiency test scores.

CASL is also developing a version of Hi-LAB that will be deployable over the Web, further expanding CASL’s aptitude testing capabilities.

More at www.casl.umd.edu/hilab