



Language Selection and Placement at West Point

Purpose:

This paper describes the process by which cadets select a foreign language for study and how they are placed into the appropriate language courses. It will also discuss language placement trends since 2000.

General:

Foreign language study is a key cornerstone of a cadet's intellectual development. As such, all cadets at West Point are required to take at least two semesters of a foreign language. No matter their previous experience, cadets are not allowed to "validate," or test out of this requirement. Cadets choose from among eight languages: Arabic, Chinese, French, German, Persian, Portuguese, Russian and Spanish. The option to study Persian was added in 2008, prior to that, cadets chose from among the other seven languages.

Cadets With Previous Language Experience:

Cadets come to West Point with language skills acquired through a variety of sources: High School, previous college, at home or abroad. During their first week at West Point, all cadets are surveyed to determine the previous experience in all languages, not just the eight taught at West Point. Although cadets cannot validate the language requirement, those who wish to continue in the language with which they have previous experience are tested in writing and orally to determine the proper level at which they should be placed. Those cadets also have the option to start a new language at the basic level.

Strategic Languages at West Point:

The primary goal of language education at West Point is cadet intellectual development, not filling the Army's immediate need for linguists in critical languages. Nonetheless, these two purposes are often complementary. It is important to note that cadet demand for critical languages most often mirrors the Army's needs, without forcing cadets into languages. Demand for critical languages, particularly Arabic, since 2001, has filled or exceeded our capacity. All languages taught at West Point, with the exception of German, are on the Strategic Language List. The addition of Persian in 2007 also added a valuable strategic language to cadet options.

To better meet the Army's need for capabilities in strategic languages, one of the top three languages that cadets identify must be Arabic, Chinese or Russian. Given the high demand for these languages as a first choice, few cadets must be moved into their second or third choice to fill enrollments in these three critical languages. In 2008, 86 cadets, or 6.7% of the class were moved from their first choices into these three critical languages (see Chart I below).

All cadets are tested upon arrival at West Point in the Modern Language Aptitude Test (MLAT). Only cadets who score above 100 on the test, and who have at least 1200 on the SAT test are placed into Arabic, Chinese or Russian. As a framework for comparison, scores on the MLAT for the Class of 2012 ranged from 14 to 163, with a median of 113.

During their first month at West Point, cadets with previous language experience are tested orally and in writing to determine the correct level of language placement. A cadet with two or more years of a foreign language who does not place into the intermediate (second year) course or higher will normally go into his/her second choice language. Such a cadet will not be placed into the basic course for a language they have already studied, unless there are extenuating circumstances.

At the conclusion of placement testing, the Department of Foreign Languages assigns each cadet into the appropriate language course based on cadet preference, classroom capacity and MLAT and SAT scores.

Cadet Preferences:

Each cadet chooses their top three language selections from the eight offered. The charts below show cadet first choice languages since 2000. The actual results of this selection have varied considerably over the past eight years. Nonetheless, some conclusions may be drawn. Spanish is consistently the top choice, with between 25-40% of the class picking it as their first choice. German has typically been second, although since 2002, Arabic has risen to be roughly equal with German as a choice. The remaining languages have fluctuated considerably, but always been well below these three.

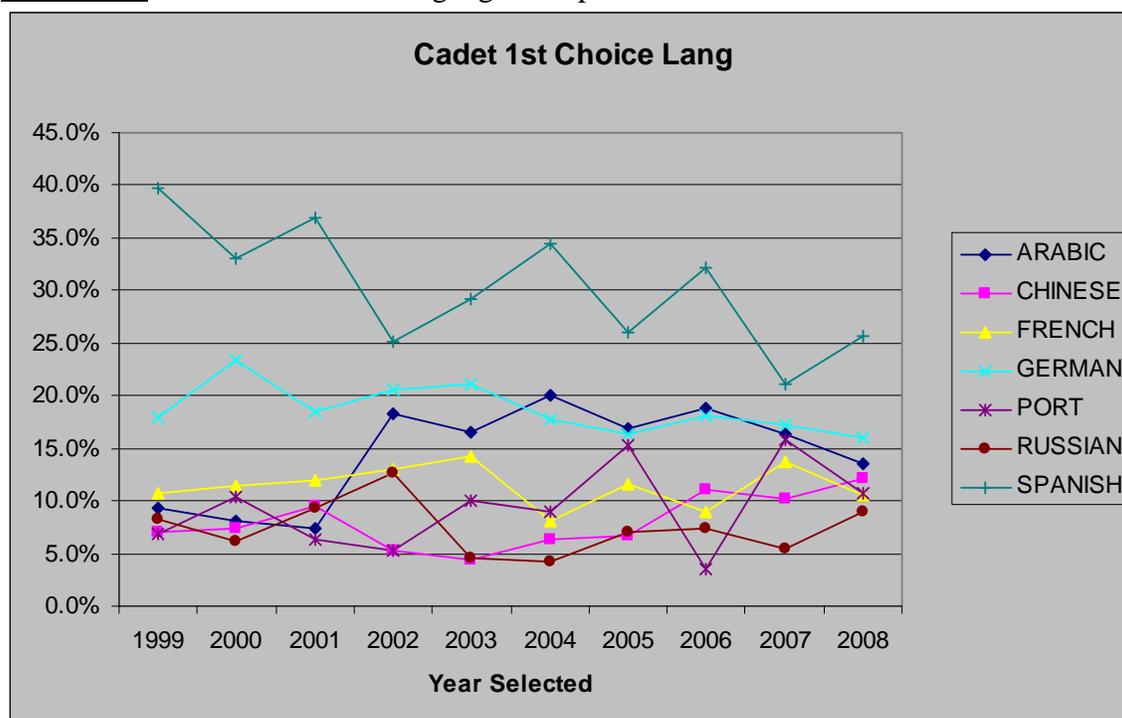
Chart G below shows the actual 1st choice selections. The date represents the time that the choice was made.

CHART G: Cadet 1st Choice Languages by Percentage

	Jul-99	Jul-00	Jul-01	Jul-02	Jul-03
ARABIC:	9.3%	8.1%	7.4%	18.3%	16.6%
CHINESE:	7%	7.4%	9.5%	5.3%	4.4%
FRENCH:	10.7%	11.5%	12%	13%	14.2%
GERMAN:	18%	23.3%	18.4%	20.6%	21.1%
PORTUGUESE:	6.9%	10.4%	6.4%	5.2%	10.1%
RUSSIAN:	8.3%	6.2%	9.3%	12.6%	4.5%
SPANISH:	39.8%	33.1%	37%	25.1%	29.1%

	Jul-04	Jul-05	Jul-06	Jul-07	Jul-08
ARABIC:	20%	16.9%	18.8%	16.4%	13.5%
CHINESE:	6.4%	6.7%	11.1%	10.2%	12.1%
FRENCH:	8%	11.6%	8.9%	13.7%	10.6%
GERMAN:	17.7%	16.3%	18.1%	17.3%	16.0%
PORTUGUESE:	9%	15.3%	3.5%	15.8%	10.8%
RUSSIAN:	4.3%	7.0%	7.4%	5.5%	9.0%
SPANISH:	34.5%	26.1%	32.1%	21.0%	25.6%
PERSIAN:					2.4%

CHART H: Cadet 1st Choice Language Comparison



Although the graph above is somewhat busy, it reflects clear trends for cadet language choices. Spanish is consistently the most popular choice. Since 2002, Arabic has risen to be consistently on a par with German as the second choice. Among the remaining languages, there is tremendous year-to-year variation, as exemplified by the sudden rises and drops in Portuguese and Russian enrollments.

Preferences vs. Placement:

In general, most cadets have been placed into their first choice language. Chart H shows the percentage of cadets who actually received their first choice. In some cases, a sudden surge in demand for a particular language exceeded teaching capacity and thus necessitated a shift to second choice languages. This was particularly the case with the demand for Arabic in the years 2002-2004, which affected the classes of 2006-2008.

More often, however, the reason for cadets being placed into their second choice language is their performance on the placement test. Cadets with previous experience in a language, who do not score high enough to take an intermediate or advanced course, will not generally be allowed to take the basic course in the same language. This is most often the case with Spanish. For example, a new cadet with three years of High School Spanish who does not score high enough to qualify for intermediate Spanish, will not be allowed to start with the basic Spanish course. Most cadets in this situation will go into their second choice language.

Additionally, beginning in 2005, with the implementation of the Language Transformation Roadmap, West Point began a conscious effort to strengthen enrollments

in high priority languages—Arabic, Chinese and Russian. As all cadets are now tested on the Modern Language Aptitude Test (MLAT), both their MLAT scores and SAT scores are used to determine which cadets may be placed into one of these three languages. Cadets must have a minimum of 100 on the MLAT and 1200 on the SAT to be so placed.

Chart H - Cadets Placed in 1st Choice Language:

<u>Class</u>	
2002	- 100%
2003	- 99%
2004	- 99.9%
2005	- 92%
2006	- 92%
2007	- 91%
2008	- 87%
2009	- 87%
2010	- 91.4%
2011	- 85% (estimated)
2012	- 84.5%

CHART I – Cadets Moved into Critical Languages:

(Class of 2012)

Arabic	- 30
Chinese	- 15
Russian	- 41
TOTAL	- 86 (6.7% of cadet class)

When Cadets Begin Language Study:

The majority of cadets will begin their required language study in their second (Sophomore) year at West Point. A small number, typically no more than 10% of the class, will begin language in their first (Freshman) year. Cadets who have validated the Chemistry course, which is normally required of first year cadets, are automatically placed into language their first year. Other cadets may be placed into first year language if they volunteer to do so, which will usually require them to move Chemistry into their second year (concurrently with Physics). During their language preference survey, cadets are asked if they wish to volunteer to do this.

Cadets are only placed into language their first year if their academic indicators show they will not be at risk. These include the MLAT and SAT tests, but the best predictor of success is the Chemistry validation exam. Cadets who performed very well on the Chemistry exam, but not quite well enough to validate Chemistry completely, are most likely to be able to move Chemistry into the same year as Physics with no ill effect.

Chart J below shows the number of cadets placed into language their first year:

CHART J : FIRST-YEAR CADET PLACEMENT INTO LANGUAGE

CLASS YEAR TESTED TOTAL CADETS	2012 Jul-08	2011 Jul-07	2010 Jul-06	2009 Jul-05	2008 Jul-04
	1266	1229	1272	1200	1224
# VALIDATED CHEMISTRY	35	35	54	47	47
% VALIDATED CHEMISTRY	2.8%	2.8%	4.2%	3.9%	3.8%
# TAKING LANG FRESHMAN YEAR	131	130	108	122	166
% TAKING LANG FRESHMAN YEAR	10.3%	10.6%	8.5%	10.2%	13.6%

CLASS YEAR TESTED TOTAL CADETS	2007 Jul-03	2006 Jul-02	2005 Jul-01	2004 Jul-00	2003 Jul-99
	1256	1126	1155	1130	1101
# VALIDATED CHEMISTRY	41	28	35	30	41
% VALIDATED CHEMISTRY	3.3%	2.5%	3.0%	2.7%	3.7%
# TAKING LANG FRESHMAN YEAR	133	130	123	126	121
% TAKING LANG FRESHMAN YEAR	10.6%	11.5%	10.6%	11.2%	11.0%

Language Placement Results:

Based on oral and written testing cadets are placed into the appropriate level of language. Chart K below shows the results of placement for recent classes. The majority of cadets are placed into beginning courses, although in Spanish, French and German, a large number place into intermediate or higher courses.

Chart K: Cadet Placement By Level

	<u>Beginner</u>	<u>Intermediate</u>	<u>Higher</u>	<u>Total</u>
ARABIC:	184	1	1	186
CHINESE:	156	5	0	161
FRENCH:	96	33	29	158
GERMAN:	147	55	4	206
PERSIAN:	40	0	0	40
PORTUGUESE:	172	1	1	174
RUSSIAN:	152	1	3	156
SPANISH:	56	79	50	185
				1266

These numbers differ from final enrollments because of the constant attrition of the cadet class from the time of the language preference survey to the actual beginning of their language course. All new cadets identify their preferences during the first week of basic training, but most do not begin their language course until their second year. During this time, the cadet class is steadily reduced by resignations, particularly at the early stages. These numbers show the total cadet class at the time of language preference identification.