An Evidence-based Review of *Test de Connaissance du Français* (TCF): A French Competency Test for Non-native Speakers of French

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Abstract

Test de Connaissance du Français (TCF), a French knowledge test for any non-native speakers of French, is an official language exam for the certificate of proficiency in French designed by *France Éducation international* (FIE) and accredited by *le Ministère Français de l'Éducation Nationale, de la Jeunesse et des Sports* (French Ministry of National Education, Youth and Sports). To meet the need triggered by American TOEFL and British IELTS, TCF was created in 2001 by FIE (formerly Centre International d'études Pédagogiques) and has been administrated in more than 120 countries by more than 700 centers around the world and has served for more than 2,000,000 candidates by the year 2022 for personal, academic or professional purposes (France Éducation International, n.d.). The increasing number of French learners worldwide and the growth of popularity French enjoyed give rise to the need of more reviews of test fairness and usefulness on recognized French competence tests such as TCF. However, unlike the large number of assessment practices focusing on English language testing, only a few studies available show awareness about the assessment on world languages other than English. With the hope to enrich the body of research in the field of language testing and to expand the scope of assessment on world languages, this review aims at examining the overall usefulness and fairness of TCF using Kunnan's (2018) most recent theoretical framework of test fairness and justice. As a result, our review shows that TCF test developers have made great efforts on addressing core issues of validity, reliability, and authenticity, while there might be room for improvement to provide more meaningful and useful information to all stakeholders.

Keywords: French as a foreign language; Language testing, TCF, Test fairness and justice framework

1. Introduction

French is an official language in 29 countries across multiple continents, being the second most widely spoken mother tongue in the European Union, and about 77 to 110 million people speak French as a second language to varying degrees of proficiency (Saint Ignatius High School, 2011). After English, French is also the most widely taught language in educational systems around the world (Elder, 2017). To answer the strong international demand for official certification of French competence, *Test de Connaissance du Français* (TCF) was

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developed as a recognized test available for French learners worldwide who would like to assess their French language skills.

TCF is a test of *le Ministère Français de l'Éducation Nationale, de la Jeunesse et des Sports* (French Ministry of National Education, Youth and Sports), assessing the general French language skills of people whose French is not their mother tongue. Based on different test use, there are four types of TCF: *TCF- Canada* (TCF- Canada), *TCF- Intégration, Résidence et Nationalité* (TCF- Integration, Residency, and Nationality), *TCF – Québec* (TCF- Quebec City) and *TCF - tout public* (TCF- all public) (France Éducation International, n.d.; Mégre, 2009). Each test is oriented to the Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR) scale. The following description and appraisal target on TCF- *tout public* (TCF- all public).

This test review involves two main sections. The general description section provides detailed information about TCF, including test purpose, structure and format, test administration, and test developer's details, depicting the overall design of the language test. The appraisal section consists of five claims generated from Kunnan's (2018) latest theoretical framework of test fairness and justice, and an evidence-based appraisal of TCF is conducted to examine to what extent the core issues of reliability, validity, and authenticity were addressed by the test design of TCF.

It is expected that this review helps to fill the research gap that nearly no study has been conducted to critically review TCF, a large-scale and high-stakes international French competence test, with a sound and recent theoretical framework for language testing. Together with other recent reviews (French: e.g., Elder, 2017; Portuguese: e.g., Zhao & Liu, 2019; Chinese: e.g., Su & Shin, 2015; Korean: e.g., Im et al., 2022; Japanese: e.g., Nishizawa et al., 2022), awareness from the field of language testing about the assessment of world languages other than English is also hoped to be raised.

Here, introduce the paper. The paragraphs continue from here and are only separated by headings, subheadings, images, and formulae. The section headings are arranged by numbers, bold and 12 pt.

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2. General Description

2.1. Test Purpose

According to the introduction to TCF on the official webpage of France Éducation International (https://www.france-education-international.fr/test/tcf-tout-public?langue=fr), Test de Connaissance du Français (TCF) is a French knowledge test for any non-native speakers of French who need to evaluate and validate their knowledge of French in a reliable and recognized way no matter for personal, academic or professional reasons (France Éducation International, n.d.).

2.2. Structure of the Test

TCF consists of two sets of tests. One is compulsory, and the other is optional, which can be chosen to take or not by candidates according to their needs. As for the compulsory set, paper-based and computer-based forms are both available, including three parts: listening comprehension, proficiency in language structures, and reading comprehension. Overall, it comprises 76 multiple-choice items: 29 listening comprehension items, 18 language structure items, and 29 reading comprehension items. All the items are presented in the format of multiple-choice questions (MCQs) with only one correct answer from four answer choices (A, B, C, D) and on a principle of progressive difficulty, ranging from level A1 to level C2 of the Common European Framework of Reference for Language (CEFR) (Mégre, 2009). What should be noted is that the computer-based form of the test includes 15 additional items, which are not counted into the final score but contribute to CIEP's analysis of the validity of items. The listening comprehension part tests participants' ability of understanding spoken French, including (a) familiar words and common phrases used in daily communication situations (dialogues, interviews, telephone discussions, etc.); (b) simple messages and announcements with clear main ideas; (c) presentations on concrete or abstract topics; and (d) any type of speech delivered at a normal rate. In this part, recording for each item is broadcast only once, and the question is asked after the audio document is played. The second part aims to measure candidates' mastery of French language structures, from the most basic to the most complex, by requiring participants to (a) spot errors in lexicon or register; (b) choose the equivalent of an expression or grammatical term; and (c) choose the appropriate formulaic sequences in communicative situation. The last part of the mandatory section targets the ability of understanding written French, such as (a) familiar names, words, and very simple phrases used in communicative situation, like messages from administrations and letters from friends; (b) information contained in ordinary documents (advertisements, flyers, menus, and schedules, etc.); (c) information about individuals, fact or events; (d) common texts about daily life and work; (e) articles and reports in which authors take a stand on concrete or abstract subjects; (f) long and complex argumentative writing or literary texts; and (g) texts with abstract and complex topics extracted from books and articles.

The non-compulsory set consists a speaking test and a writing test, and candidates may take them if they wish to or in response to some specific requirements from institutions. The speaking test is conducted in the form of a face-to-face interview with an examiner, in which, three tasks targeting different levels of speaking skills are included. The first task is an interview without preparation, testing test takers' oral skills in keeping conversations on daily topics with

a person that they do not know (the examiner). The second task is a pre-prepared conversation practice aiming at test takers' ability to acquire information on social topics in oral French. Test takers are required to elicit the interaction and act as a conversation-leader during the task. The last task is a non-pre-prepared expression of views on more profound topics, such as culture, values, and ecological issues, in which test takers are required to demonstrate their ability to speak spontaneously, continuously, and convincingly by answering a question chosen by the examiner. The whole process of the speaking test is recorded. The writing test also consists of three tasks that are presented in an increasing difficulty order, testing test takers' ability of addressing information, demonstrating experience, and developing argumentative texts, with a minimum of 300 words and a maximum of 450 words.

2.3. Length and Administration

TCF is devised and administrated by France Éducation International (FIE), an official institution sponsored by the French Ministry of Education and the Ministry of Higher Education, as an assessment tool. The total duration of the paper-based form of the compulsory set is 1 hour 25 minutes: 25 minutes for the listening test, 15 minutes for the proficiency in language structures test, and 45 minutes for the reading test. 10 additional minutes are given for the computer-based form of the test. In addition, the two optional tests last 1 hour and 12 minutes in total: 12 minutes (maximum) for the speaking test and 60 minutes for the writing test.

2.4. Scoring Procedures and Results

TCF certifies six levels of French proficiency based on test takers' performance on the compulsory set of tests according to the level grids provided by France Éducation international (FIE) (https://www.france-education-international.fr/sites/default/files/grille-niveaux-tcf.pdf): elementary level (100 to 199 points), upper elementary level (200 to 299 points), intermediate level (300 to 399 points), upper intermediate level (400 to 499 points), advanced level (500 to 599 points), and upper advanced level (600 to 699 points), as Table 1 presents.

Table 1.
The Equivalence between the Scores and Levels of TCF.

Certified level	Score range
A1 not reached	0-99
Elementary (A1)	100-199
Upper elementary (A2)	200-299
Intermediate (B1)	300-399
Upper intermediate (B2)	400-499
Advance (C1)	500-599
Upper advance (C2)	600-699

The score obtained in three sub-tests of the compulsory part depends on the number of correct answers. Only the right answers are counted, and the wrong or lack of answers are counted as 0. However, the overall score for the compulsory part is the result of a calculation

taking into account the degree of difficulty of the items and is not a simple arithmetic addition of correct answers. The scoring of this part is completed by machine, with the algorithm complied by the team of le Département Évaluation et Certifications (Department of Evaluation and Certifications). Human intervention is only requested when the machine detects ambiguity (for example, a poorly checked box).

If the speaking and the writing part are chosen, the scoring of these two sections will be completed by human examiners who have completed the training provided by FIE. And moreover, raters for the writing part are selected after a selection test based on their significant experience in the field of French as a Foreign Language (FLE) and evaluation. Each oral and written test is assessed twice completely independently by two different examiners, without either being aware of the score assigned by the other. The performance of the oral and written expression is assessed mainly based on three criteria: linguistic use (e.g., extent and mastery of the lexicon, grammatical correction, fluency, pronunciation, overall fluency of speech), pragmatic use (e.g., interaction, structuring of discourse, coherence and cohesion, thematic development) and sociolinguistic use (e.g., suitability for the situation of communication).

The results will be sent to testing centers within 15 working days from the date when France Éducation international receives the hard copies of examination materials. In the context of computer-based test, this period will be reduced to 10 working days from the date when the examination program is completed (but the period will be extended if the two optional sections are chosen). And test takers have to collect their own certificates directly from the testing centers where they have taken the TCF test. The certificate will be valid for 2 years from the date of its delivery. The validity date will be presented on the certificate, and only one copy will be issued.

2.5. Author/Publisher and Contact Information

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2.6. Price

Currently, 703 testing centers in 142 countries are authorized to organize TCF, and the test registration fee is charged by local authorized testing centers according to the national incomes per capita index. In China, candidates pay 1700 RMB, about 243 euros to take TCF.

3. Appraisal of Test de Connaissance du Français (TCF)

The appraisal will be conducted under the framework of fairness and justice by Kunnan's (2018) fairness and justice framework from six main aspects in relation to opportunity-to-learn, reliability, consistency, validity, absence of bias, as well as washback and consequences. Evidence selected from test official documents and public information presented on its official website serve as a warrant that contributed to support the claims.

Claim 1: TCF provides all test takers with adequate guidance and opportunity to learn about and practice the exam prior to test taking.

Information related to TCF is provided to the general public at its official website (https://www.france-education-international.fr/test/tcf-tout-public?langue=fr),

in which LISEO, the documentary portal of FIE, provides different sorts of information about studies and resources on educational policies and the teaching of French around the world. Regarding the opportunity to learn, candidates have clear and direct access to important documents for the preparation of TCF, including the overview and introduction of TCF, the description of test content and format, a holistic evaluation criterion, the guidance of registration, the way of receiving test results, the test application requirement, test exemption standard, and responsibilities and rights of TCF test takers. The *TCF Candidate Manual*, gathering all the details and guidelines mentioned above, is also available on the public website. Learning resources consist of a booklist designed by the test office and websites offering 17 series of practices centered on grammatical and comprehension questions as well as a 90-minute sample real-world test which meets the conditions in an official session. Given that all the resources and information are open to the public at any time, it is believed that TCF provides test takers with adequate instructions and opportunities to get familiar with and prepare for the test prior to taking it.

However, some potential rebuttals in this regard will be presented as follows. In terms of opportunity-to-learn, the information provided by the official website is in French only and the wording is at a relatively advanced level. Due to the fact that TCF is a worldwide language test for speakers taking French as a foreign language with different levels of proficiencies, the French-only webpage might cause difficulties for candidates who are still at elementary or intermediate level to read and get proper access to the resources they want. Lacking of translations of languages other than French, the access to instructions as well as resources may possibly be a problem for candidates who just learn French at a very early stage. Therefore, it hinders the principle of fairness for all test takers from learning the test knowledge before taking TCF.

Claim 2: TCF ensures the consistency of its scoring procedure and reliability of scoring results, which is fair to all test takers.

In order to minimize the error of measurement, administration procedures issued by France Education International are imposed on all exam centers to ensure a reliable and fair assessment for each candidate. According to the requirement, two different visitors will conduct a double-inspection of each center before test taking. The first visitor is responsible to draw a visit report in which he/she proposes the less optimal areas of the center's work after checking both hard archives and electronic files of the center. And the second visitor will visit the center again to guarantee that the areas for improvement highlighted by the first visitor have been properly brought into compliance. One of the major purposes of the visits is to ensure that the scoring procedures are properly conducted in the accredited centers of the TCF. By doing this, it minimizes the margin of errors which may impair the reliability or consistency of the test. For the process of scoring performance, the double inspections make sure the test raters strictly

comply with the standard of scoring procedures which have been validated by empirical studies, thereby ensuring the reliability of the scoring of the test result.

In addition, the TCF office puts substantial efforts to ensure the reliability of the scoring results for all test takers. The candidate's answer sheets of the compulsory test section are marked according to an algorithm established by the team of experts in French Evaluation and Certifications Department, allowing the results to be delivered very quickly and without error. Artificial intervention is requested only when the machine detects an ambiguity (for example, an incorrectly checked box). The analyses carried out on each TCF item by the institution ensure a reliable evaluation of the skills of the candidates. As for the additional oral expression and writing tests, the performance of each test taker is assessed twice by different raters in order to achieve inter-rater reliability. The oral performance is rated for the first time by the examiner who conducts and records the interview in the center on the day of the test. Then the recording is sent to a rater for the second-time scoring. The two assessments are carried out independently and completely in a double-blind manner (without either knowing the levels assessed by the other). The effect of rater training on inter-rater reliability has been found in studies focusing on the fairness in language assessment (e.g., Doosti & Ahmadi Safa, 2021). Regarding the training of raters, all the raters have received accreditation training provided by France International Education Institution, and then are selected on the basis of practical experience in the field of French as a Foreign Language and assessment followed by a qualification test. All raters are well-trained in assessing oral and written expression from all versions of the TCF. It is convincing that the inter-rater consistency of the test scoring has been guaranteed through the double-rating procedures by two individual well-trained experts.

Claim 3: TCF is meaningful because it represents the characteristics of target language use domains (TLU domains).

The content and rubrics of the test are along with the purpose and construct of the test. As we mentioned in the introduction of TCF, the test is designed for any non-native speakers of French who need to evaluate and validate their knowledge of French in a reliable and recognized way no matter for personal, academic, or professional reasons (Centre International d'études Pédagogiques, 2014, 2016). When examining the content and rubrics of the test, it is clear that the test reflects the characteristics of the TLU domains (Arefsadr et al., 2022). Taking the input of listening and reading comprehension as an example, the genres and topics are consistent with the language used in authentic communicative situations (e.g., dialogues, interviews, telephone discussions, radio or television shows, and presentations) under either personal or professional context expressing either concrete or abstract ideas. For the reading comprehension section, the genres of text are commonly used in the TLU domains, for example, small advertisements, flyers, menus and schedules, specialized articles, reports, etc. The same features can also be found in the linguistic-focused section and the optional test sections. The content of TCF is appeared to be construct-relevant, based on the requirement in relation to test meaningfulness in Kunnan's fairness and justice framework (Kunnan, 2018).

With regard to the variety of input, the speech rate of the input, and the channel used to deliver the listening text (Kunnan, 2014), however, it can be observed that the listening input only includes the audio recorded by speakers with standard accent speaking at a standard

speaking rate, which is away from the authentic construct-relevant features. As a result, the validity may suffer in this regard. Furthermore, regarding the response format in the compulsory sections of the test, the multiple-choice-only format may pose threats to the construct and content validity of the test due to the following two reasons (a) the response of language users in TLU domains is never confined to multi-choice selection tasks in written format (Kunnan, 2014); and (b) the construct-irrelevant variance or measurement errors may occur, which would certainly impair reliability and validity of the test (Kunnan, 2018). Selection tasks make it possible for test takers to apply test-wiseness to achieve the correct answer by chance, however, test-wiseness is absolutely not what the test developers expect to assess.

More modes of response format reflecting not only the authentic situation but also the integrated skills of the candidates are inevitably required to be incorporated in the assessment. In addition, the lack of publicly available reports representing actual reliability and validity indices, however, makes it impossible for us to draw an objective judgment in terms of the reliability and validity of the test.

Claim 4: TCF is free of bias and fraud across test taker groups, as it provides appropriate assistance and accommodation for test takers with disabilities, adequate locations, affordable prices, and unified administration.

TCF agency is free of bias and ensures equal treatment of any test taker who reports a disability affecting physical, sensory, mental, and cognitive function. Physical facilities (e.g., adapted room, technical help such as headphones or an enlarged copy) or personnel assistance provided by agencies allow test takers from disabled group to participate in the tests under fair conditions.

Currently, 703 testing centers in 142 countries are authorized to organize TCF, which are within a reasonable geographical distance from test takers. For example, in China, there are six exam sites located averagely in the north, south, west, and east of China (Beijing, Shanghai, Guangzhou, Wuhan, Chengdu, and Shenyang), serving as easy-to-reach sites for most test takers, although some extra fee for traveling or short-term living appears to be unavoidable. With regard to the uniform administration, authorized visits are carried out by FIE to TCF-accredited centers in France and abroad, which ensures that all the uniformed standards and procedures are well-complied with so that each candidate for TCF is available to sit the test and their performance will be evaluated under the same conditions around the world.

In terms of avoiding cheating and fraud, the TCF agency put a great deal of effort into preventing fraudsters and cheaters from challenging the fairness of the test. A clear declaration of punishment for any possible fraud cases is publicly presented on the official website. The content of tests is strictly confidential. Any reproduction of dissemination, partial or total, by any means, is regarded as fraud and cheating, which is strictly prohibited. In the event of a flagrant offense of fraud, attempted fraud or detection of fraud, the candidate will risk disciplinary sanctions proposed by the examination center, and even criminal proceedings issued by the disciplinary committee of FIE.

One potential rebuttal of this claim, however, may occur in the procedure of disability declaration. To benefit from accommodations or other assistance, the candidates must provide

the examination center with a recent medical certificate at least two months before the date of the session. However, it may result in inconvenience and unfairness for those who suffer physical or psychological troubles within two months before the date of the test. The examination center, therefore, is supposed to formulate a complementary document of taking flexible measures to avoid this situation, in order to ensure fairness for all test takers.

Moreover, as for the test fee, although the charge of which is determined by local authorized testing centers based on the national economic situation, it still seems to be too high to involve all the possible test-taking population. Regarding the judgement related to the test price, however, it still needs to be further examined by checklists or survey questionnaires (Kunnan, 2018). In spite of a satisfaction survey conducted by the testing office showing over 88% of candidates are satisfied with the test regarding the quality of reception by the centers, appraisal from other parties which shows more objectivity has never been conducted in terms of the administration imposed on the test.

Claim 5: TCF is beneficial to the community and society, and justice and positive values are promoted by the test institution.

Regarding the content of TCF, which includes listening comprehension, proficiency of language structure, and reading comprehension, the most obvious washback to immediate stakeholders (e.g., test takers, teachers, and administrators) of this exam is the content and methods of learning and teaching French as a foreign language. According to FIE's introduction of the competence that each section evaluates, the communicative skill is emphasized and a context of communication is set in each section, which may attract more attention to the competence of communicating linguistically, socio-linguistically, and pragmatically in both learning and teaching process. However, concerns about speaking and writing skills being overlooked in both learning and teaching are less likely to be addressed as the washback of TCF.

As stated in test purpose, TCF is a language test drawing a picture of one's overall competence of the French language (as Figure 1 shows), thereby, speaking and writing are designed as optional parts, providing additional and more all-around evidence to one's French language ability.

In addition, test institution of TCF provides possible approaches for candidates to make requests for re-evaluation of speaking and writing tests. Candidates who have questions about their results are encouraged to apply for a re-evaluation of the written and/or oral expression tests/test with the reassessment application form (requested by local testing centers) accompanied with the original certificate within one month since the original certificate is issued, which demonstrates test institution's cares about test takers' concerns and efforts on advancing fairness and justice.

Figure 1
An Example of TCF Result
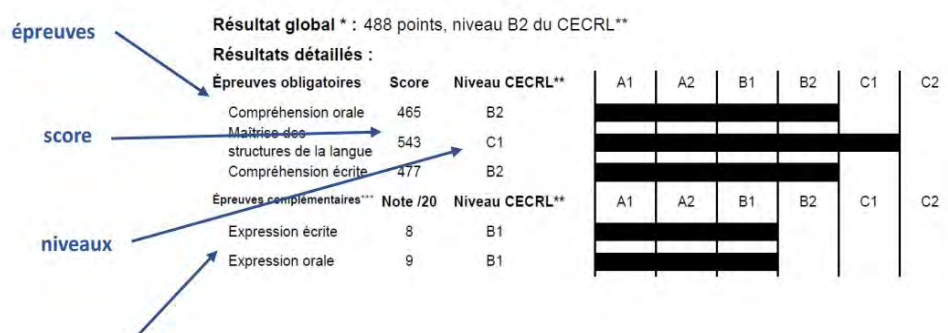
However, there is very little transparency regarding the test institution's choice of test items, although FIE claims that necessary analysis has been carried out on each item of TCF by la Cellule Qualité et Expertise (the Quality and Expertise Unit) to ensure a precise and fair assessment of the skills of candidates. Moreover, the method of measuring the proficiency level of candidates is also ambiguous. FIE asserts that the level candidates reach does not only depend on the number of correct or wrong answers in MCQ (the compulsory part of TCF with only multiple-choice questions). It actually takes the difficulty level of items into account as well. However, no further explanation has been presented clearly to the distribution or proportion of items with various difficulty levels, which would lead to some unintended consequences as a result.

4. Summary and Discussion

Overall, test developers of TCF make great efforts in test development, providing test takers with adequate opportunities to learn, ensuring meaningfulness indicated by the core issues of validity and reliability, and guaranteeing the unified administration of the test. As a large-scale and high-stakes language competence test, it is understandable that TCF needs to tackle various challenges to balance practicality and issues of reliability, validity, and authenticity. Although only selective items are used in the main part of TCF, which assess receptive language knowledge in isolation and might lead to concerns about validity and authenticity, the communicative competence is emphasized through the chosen genres and topics of items in the compulsory part of TCF, which are consistent with the authentic communicative context. Additionally, the design of writing and speaking sections adopts an integrated performance-based assessment approach that takes communicative competence as the priority. By giving information about French learners' overall language proficiency through the receptive language assessment in the compulsory part as well as providing the availability of taking the integrated assessment that incorporates contextualized communicative interactions into language assessment in the optional part based on personal or academic needs, we see that TCF test developers do take great care providing more meaningful and useful information for all the stakeholders involved while also trying to ensure the practicality at the same time.

However, our test review shows that there are also rooms for improvement to further enhance the quality and usefulness of the test. For example, necessary studies containing

reliability and validity indices, which contribute to underpinning the meaningfulness of the test, are in need of being conducted by the test office itself or other scholars who are interested in TCF. In addition, some information which might give rise to ambiguity in relation to the test needs to be further clarified for all test takers. Besides, the regulation of the procedures for disability declaration is still in need of simplification and rationalization. Lastly, it would be fairer to test takers who are economically disadvantaged if the cost of the test could be adjusted to a more affordable price, or some scholarship could be granted to those who perform excellently but is unable to afford the test.

It is expected that more attention will be drawn and more discussion will be opened to large-scale assessments on world languages other than English. Additionally, we hope that more relevant research will be generated from different stakeholders to evaluate the language test from more profound and comprehensive perspectives, and more testing practices will be triggered to help improve the test by addressing the issues mentioned in the review together with TCF test developers, so that more meaningful, authentic, and useful information about learners' language proficiency will be provided in future practice.

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