

Language and Cognitive ability Assumptions: The Interface Within Cultural and Special Needs Contexts

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Abstract

This paper explores the critical role that language and culture play in the assessment of cognitive ability in students. While research has long recognized the challenges of using standardized approaches to assess children from minority groups, educational practice continues to be dominated by traditional testing methods. The authors argue that within seemingly homogenous cultures who share language, significant variation exists that could negatively impact measurement of ability via language-loaded approaches. Using language typical of Newfoundland & Labrador (NL) culture the authors develop a standardized measure of verbal intelligence. The instrument is administered to practising educators in NL as well as five other provinces so as to illustrate cultural language variation and its possible impact on perceptions of cognition. The results serve as a reminder of the importance of examining cultural contamination and language variation when measuring cognition and add to the concern related to over-representation of minority children in special education programs.

Language as a Human Imperative

Undeniably, language is at the core of human existence. Merleau-Ponty (1945) posited that thought and language are one — cognition being language; language, cognition. Although such a categorical stance can be challenged as dogmatic and nonveridical from a number of theoretical perspectives, the critical role of language in humanness is irrefutable. It is what defines and distinguishes creatures at the apex of the phylogenetic scale from those at the lower positions. It is through his use of symbols that man has usurped the ascendant position. Schmidt (1973) captured the essence:

In the long run it is language that will enable the average child, and even a relatively dull child, to outstrip the chimpanzee in problem-solving ability. Much more significant than this ability is that language will open up a world of human meaning that nothing can open up for the chimpanzee. (p. 24)

Cassirer (1946) in *Essay on Man* described man as *animal symbolicum*, the animal that creates symbols and a symbolic world.

Gollnick and Chinn (2006) define language as a vehicle for communication, a means of shaping cultural and personal identity, and a way to socialize an individual into a cultural group. The fact that cognition has been shown to predate verbal fluency, and can take various nonverbal forms, does not diminish its pivotal role as a functional requisite in humanness – it cannot be trivialized.

With language we transform, modify and shape much of our cognition. Through language we transcend time and are able to describe events temporally removed – to reflect on the past and conject the future. Language is a preferred performatory medium, nowhere more than in western civilization.

The direction of ontological development is toward more extensive and elaborate use of symbols. With maturity comes the ability to deal with abstraction, to function independent of the physically present, to introspect, to achieve meta-awareness, and to generate strategies and solutions. Language is *not just another* of the many attributes which help to define the course of human development.

Humans vary in their facility with language. They are not equally fluent nor are they equally capable of exploiting the power of language. However, most individuals strive to use language. Even individuals who are the most cognitively challenged try to find expression through language, albeit simplistic and arduously generated in many cases. In contemporary society individuals are evaluated both socially and intellectually by their facility with language. It is employed as a metric. Those who are denied language, or are restricted in its use, have since early times been described as disabled or developmentally delayed. Davis and Rimm (2004) posit that within the definition of intellectual giftedness the overriding trait "is that they [gifted children] are developmentally advanced in language and thought" (p. 35). Similarly, Porter (2005) views children's precocious comprehension of language from an early age as a "robust indicator of intellectual ability" (p. 16). Given all of this, and the undeniable role of language in human functioning, cognitive ability assumptions founded upon language performance must be carefully considered, particularly within cultural and special needs contexts.

Language Differences and Bias in Cognitive Assessment

Concern for the accuracy of standardized assessment for students of diverse cultural backgrounds has been documented in the literature (Armour-Thomas, 1992). According to Hilliard (1975) abusive use of cognitive ability tests has been present from the beginning of the IQ test movement:

It is interesting to note that when Henry Goddard, in 1912, administered the Stanford-Binet Intelligence Test to immigrants, some remarkable results were obtained to support arguments for restricted immigration. The test results established that "83% of the Jews, 80% of the Hungarians, 79% of the Italians, 87% of the Russians were feeble-minded." (p. 18)

Still today there is an "Anglocentric" bias in a number of intelligence tests. Standard instructions may purport the evenhanded nature of the test and the interpretation of results, but at the same time, leave little latitude for cultural variations in vocabulary, language usage and experiential cultural differences. Gopaul-McNichol and Armour-Thomas (2002) address this topic suggesting that "the construction of standardized assessment instruments, as well as the research on student performance that uses these instruments is equally biased as it reflects Western/Anglo/Euro epistemological traditions [in which] there is a tendency to generalize findings to other groups that do not share those perspectives. Often, studies do not include operationally definable constructs of culture and when they do, terms like *culturally disadvantaged* or *cultural deprivation* betray an ethnocentric bias" (p. 9).

For example, a youngster in a remote Newfoundland & Labrador outport fishing community might respond to the test item, "What does C.O.D. mean?" with the statement "That's a fish b'y." Standard instructions regarding answer interpretation would rule out this response as legitimate. As noted by Hilliard "It is very likely that contextual observations of children actually functioning cognitively in regular situations would reveal patterns of intelligence which are systematically missed by standardized measuring situations" (p. 27). Hilliard further explains:

However, the *test format cannot handle novel responses!* In order for a standardized test to be scored, all possible correct answers must be anticipated. These are determined before the student who will take the test is ever known by name. A novel response which demonstrates high intellectual competence cannot be scored in the traditional format. Consequently, pupils with high intellectual capability may simply be missed because examiners do not know what questions to ask. (p. 23)

In brief, to be valid, tests must measure the attributes we think they are measuring. Scores based upon culturally contaminated test content may lead to invalid judgments concerning a student's learning characteristics. The assumption that all students enter the test situation with equivalent background experience is erroneous. Taylor and Whittaker (2009) describe a child's multiple worlds and "the cultural divide that can exist between the home and school" (p. 118).

Educators must examine interactions between cultural preparation and curriculum content. Generally, schools anticipate student behaviour based upon the dominant culture. For example, it is assumed that children will respond cooperatively to teacher instructions and will be positively motivated by verbal praise. But children are strongly influenced by personal experiences. If the expectations and values of the home are vastly different from those in the school environment, serious problems can result. As noted by Kirk, Gallagher and Anastasiow (2000), "an incorrect diagnosis can be made if a teacher misinterprets a culturally different child's behavior as disturbing or resistant" (p. 55).

Recent research on minority group students has posed many of the same questions as has cross-cultural research over time with regard to the ecological and environmental shaping of human abilities, accordingly, content for intelligence tests has been harshly criticized in recent years – often with reference to language-based items. A major problem underlying psychological assessment is the assumption that children have been exposed to comparable acculturation. Testing based upon this assumption is valid only when the assumption reflects reality. However, Samuda (1998) cautions, that ensuring accuracy of assessment findings for minority children is not simply a matter of selecting an instrument that is marketed as culture-fair. He stated that "even the so-called culture-fair tests are really only culture-reduced because they assume that examinees have been socialized and educated in the culture in which the test originated" (p. 17).

Philpott, Nesbit, Cahill and Jeffery (2004), with reference to culturally- appropriate assessment, note that caution against the inappropriate use of standardized instruments is so prevalent that a school of measurement has arisen that attempts to address the issue. *Culturally-fair assessment* has become a growing discipline within the assessment field with an increasing number of instruments being published and an accompanying volume of literature evolving. Lewis (1998) described the emerging test development process:

The movement to so called culture-free and culture-fair tests was begun to counteract, or at least neutralize, the culturally loaded information and language items found in standardized tests. . . .The reduction of the influence of culture has been attempted by decreasing the number of test items with culturally laden content and by reducing the language components present in the test. (p. 222)

Over the years some researchers (i.e., Dove, 1974; Williams, 1974) have attempted to illustrate the cultural basis in language-based IQ measures and have considered the cultural and ecological shaping of abilities.

Language as a Defining Attribute in Special Education Placement

A sizeable percentage of children classified as requiring special education or as having "special educational needs" are from culturally diverse backgrounds. Research indicates that the percentage is too sizeable. This is particularly true with regard to intellectual disability "where the conjunction of disorder (or presumed disorder), ethnicity, IQ tests, and special education has a rather nasty history" (Winzer, 2008, p. 196). Perhaps no other topic has received as much attention in discussion of special education as the over-representation of students from culturally and linguistically diverse groups in special education programs.

Early research established that minority groups have historically been over-represented in special education programs. Kamp and Chinn (1982) reported that approximately one-third of the entire special education student population in American schools was composed of minority group children. In current special education programs as well, an over-representation of children from minority group homes is of significant concern (Hunt & Marshall, 2005). Skiba et al. (2008) posit that "the disproportionate representation of minority students in special education programs has its roots in a long history of educational segregation and discrimination" (p. 284). A critical question arises: Is special education placement referral based upon a child's documented special needs, or upon value judgments highly influenced by language usage and cultural background?

Gopaul-McNichol and Armour-Thomas (2002) argue for a bio-cultural perspective on intellectual functioning that relies on Vygotsky's socio-cultural model of cognitive development. This view on cognitive ability legitimizes holistic experiences where "...cultural forces shape and guide the development of language, cognition, and personality...various dimensions of human development are interdependent so that factors influencing one dimension are likely to influence other dimensions of the developing person" (p. 28). This is underscored by the realization that there is significant diversity between cultural backgrounds, social experiences, and linguistic expression across Canada. Such a reality warrants an equally broad view of measurement that instead of relying on traditional IQ scores, calls upon multiple indicators to obtain a more holistic perspective on student functioning.

Padilla (2001), with reference to assessing First Nations populations, builds on this concern arguing that "...a paradigm shift is required, wherein the study of a specific ethnic group is valued for its own sake and need not be compared to another group, especially if the comparison is likely to be biased" (p. 23). Along a similar line, Ford, Grantham and Whiting (2008) view the under-representation of minority children in programs for the gifted as a function of the dominant role of traditional intelligence test scores in identification and placement decisions: "This almost exclusive dependence on test scores for recruitment disparately

impacts the demographics of gifted programs by keeping them disproportionately white and middle class" (p. 294).

The Newfoundland and Labrador Context

Newfoundland and Labrador is an insular province. This fact, coupled with the province's late entry into Canada in 1949, has influenced the shaping of language abilities. Possibly the most influential factor in the selection of culturally preferred skills has been the self-sufficient life-style of the numerous outport fishing ecologies which reflect the province's coastline settlement pattern.

The oral tradition of Newfoundland and Labrador has fostered a unique vocabulary linked to the sea. The language of the outport community has been described on occasion as a crude vernacular, an off-shoot of Orthodox English. Nonetheless, the outport community life has fostered a well-articulated oral language which is unique and certainly not lacking in colour. Response to the criticism that minority cultures are disorganized revitalizes the question raised by Cole and Brunner (1971) "Disorganized from who's point of view?" In the past, various language-based tests were administered to Newfoundland & Labrador students. Usually these tests reflected American middle-class culture. These students often fared poorly having had reduced contact with the mainland culture upon which these measures were standardized.

Although it is less so the case today, some still hastily conclude from testing results which involve language, that the verbal medium is underdeveloped in the province of Newfoundland and Labrador. Such a conclusion is in error. Language usage, special associations and work meanings which are built into culture, folklore and social conditioning continue to be problematic areas when trying to define individual abilities.

The Current Study

Various ability tests which were biased in their content, to some degree by language as well as by cultural tradition, were administered in Newfoundland and Labrador schools in the past. Still today, it is a matter of some debate whether such tests gave a true representation of abilities of Newfoundland & Labrador people. Of serious concern are the conclusions and educational assumptions generated on the basis of the results of such tests.

The *Newfoundland and Labrador Counterbalanced Intelligence Test (NLCIT)* was developed in 2006-2007 at Memorial University of Newfoundland with the assistance of students in the Faculty of Education engaged in teacher training. The test deals directly with the language, culture and social history of Newfoundland and Labrador. It is based upon vocabulary and expressions spoken and understood in the province.

From a pool of 48 suggested items contributed by Memorial University students, 30 items were selected for the final version of the test. Each of the 30 selected test items was correctly answered by at least 50% of a sixty member pilot sample of Newfoundland and Labrador educators. In essence, the *NLCIT* was developed to help heighten awareness of culturally loaded assessment.

Although the test may be approached with some degree of amusement, it does illustrate a serious assessment problem. The following are specimens from the test:*

6. The term "CFA" refers to:
 - a. a person who is a pest to neighbours.
 - b. an autumn apple that is fresh and clean.
 - c. a fisherman's arm that is tired from hauling fish.
 - d. a person who lives in Newfoundland but was born elsewhere.
 - e. a snack eaten just before going to bed.

21. "Birch broom in fits" is an expression used with reference to:
 - a. a person who never stops talking.
 - b. a broom with too short a handle.
 - c. a person laughing loudly at a joke.
 - d. a small boat caught in a storm.
 - e. a person's messy hair.

30. A "crackie" is:
 - a. a biscuit to have with tea.
 - b. a colourful noise maker for Christmas dinner.
 - c. a noisy crow.
 - d. a small ill-tempered dog.
 - e. a tea cup with a small crack.

The *NLCIT* was administered to practicing educators (as well as Memorial University Faculty of Education students) in Newfoundland and Labrador and to educators in five other Canadian provinces. It was hypothesized that Newfoundland and Labrador participants would obtain a higher score on the test than individuals from the other provinces who, perhaps, have been exposed to the more global culture.

Samples were selected from the following locations:

1. Newfoundland & Labrador
2. New Brunswick
3. Ontario
4. Manitoba
5. Saskatchewan
6. British Columbia

At each of the selected centers a reference person, known by one of the authors, was contacted. A covering letter indicating the nature of the study, sample selection procedure, test instructions and 25 copies of the test were forwarded to each province. The tests were scored and descriptive data were obtained for each of the provincial groups involved. Table 1 shows the means and standard deviations of scores obtained on the *NLCIT* for each of the six provinces.

*The complete test and the scoring key are presented in Appendix A.

Table 1
NLCIT Test Scores by Province

Province	Sample size	Mean	Standard deviation
Newfoundland & Labrador	25	21.76	3.19
New Brunswick	25	13.24	3.47
Ontario	25	11.04	4.22
Manitoba	25	9.80	3.28
Saskatchewan	25	9.92	3.17
British Columbia	25	8.92	4.21

Note: Maximum score = 30

It is interesting to note that achievement on the test appears as a function of distance from Newfoundland & Labrador – Manitoba, Saskatchewan and British Columbia achieving the lowest scores (see figure 1).

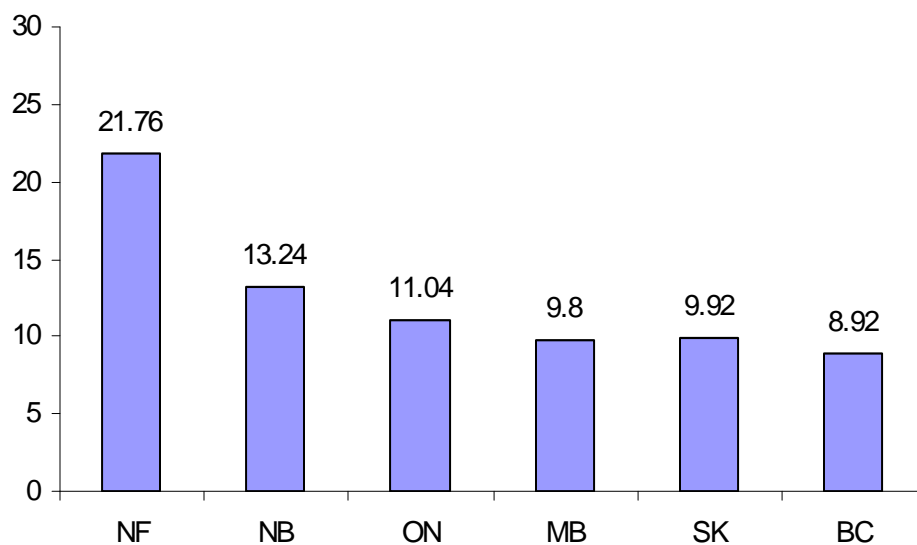


Figure 1: The mean score of six Canadian provinces on the 30 item NLCIT

The closer one physically gets to the province the stronger the accuracy of the instrument. Interestingly, such a pattern parallels linguistic variation and dialectical differences in rural communities.

Limitations

The authors draw readers' attention to three limitations of the study presented in this paper.

1. The groups selected for comparison were not randomly selected. Therefore, no generalization of the results beyond the present groups is possible.
2. The *NLCIT* has not received extensive item analysis. Therefore, questions on the instrument may vary with regard to discriminating power.
3. It was not possible to obtain information on various participant characteristics that might have been influential to the scores obtained on the test.

Conclusions

Although the research instrument employed in the study may in itself spark interest, the study helps to illustrate assessment issues associated with cultural and linguistic norms. The student in Saskatoon puzzling over the word "sleiveen" may not be so far removed from his Newfoundland and Labrador outport counterpart pondering the meaning of the prairie word, "coulee". The humour is lost when one considers that vocabulary, expression and other language skills are used in a serious vein as a key component in tests of intelligence. Subgroups within a larger culture vary in significant ways from each other. That is, they may have distinctive cultural patterns of their own, while sharing some traits and values of the macroculture (Banks, 2006).

As noted by Taylor and Whittaker (2009):

As with all individuals in a particular culture, those in the dominant society often view their culture as the "only" or "correct" viewpoint. Without an ability to look through other cultural lenses, individuals and cultures will frequently misunderstand each other (p. 119).

The *NLCIT* illustrates the effects of cultural influence, including language, on standardized instruments and the limited flexibility that such approaches have in factoring what Hiller (1975) initially referred to as "novel responses." Clearly, professionals using standardized approaches to assessment of cognitive ability, certainly those in culturally unique environs, must carefully scrutinize test scores and programming decisions based upon them. The purpose of this study was not to contribute to the plethora of instruments currently on the market for assessing student ability. Rather it provides a glimpse into the significant role that language and culture play in standardized assessment. By doing so, it validates the growing perception that there is no such thing as *culturally fair* assessment, but rather a need for closer attunement to *culturally fairer* practice. We present the argument that in the matter of sensitivity to fairness, cultures and linguistic variations must be dominant considerations.

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APPENDIX**The Newfoundland & Labrador Counterbalanced Intelligence Test**

Please circle the correct letter (a-e).

1. A "mummer" is:
 - a. a winter hat made of coarse wool
 - b. someone who doesn't appear often in public
 - c. someone who visits the hospital frequently
 - d. a Christmas visitor dressed in disguise
 - e. a fisherman who hires on as a seasonal crew member
2. Which of the following people has never been Premier of Newfoundland?
 - a. Brian Peckford
 - b. Tom Rideout
 - c. Fred Mifflin
 - d. Brian Tobin
 - e. Joseph Smallwood
3. "Twacking" refers to the activity of:
 - a. hunting small game.
 - b. window-shopping.
 - c. sanding wood.
 - d. relaxing after a meal.
 - e. cooking a large meal.
4. A "spa-doodle" refers to:
 - a. the moon in the sky during daytime
 - b. a noisy sea bird
 - c. a nighttime snack eaten outdoors
 - d. an alcoholic beverage made from home brew
 - e. a car with one headlight working
5. The Provincial flower of Newfoundland is the:
 - a. Dandelion.
 - b. Sun Flower.
 - c. Carnation.
 - d. Mayflower.
 - e. Pitcher Plant.

6. The term "CFA" refers to:
- a. a person who is a pest to neighbours.
 - b. an autumn apple that is fresh and clean.
 - c. a fisherman's arm that is tired from hauling fish.
 - d. a person who lives in Newfoundland but was born elsewhere.
 - e. a snack eaten just before going to bed.
7. "Lassy":
- a. a common name for the family dog.
 - b. a sweet topping usually put on bread.
 - c. an apron with a bib, used while cooking fish.
 - d. a teenager who often answers others rudely.
 - e. a rope for tying up to the pier.
8. What is a "swallie?"
- a. A dead sea bird
 - b. An ocean swell
 - c. A rustic outhouse
 - d. A drink of rum or whisky
 - e. A baby white coat seal
9. According to the folk song "Lukey's Boat," the boat is painted:
- a. blue.
 - b. green.
 - c. orange.
 - d. red.
 - e. yellow.
10. A traditional sloped-roof Newfoundland house is referred to as:
- a. a saltbox.
 - b. a bungalow.
 - c. an a-frame.
 - d. a stove lid.
 - e. a stage head.
11. The term "coupie down" means:
- a. to play music with a lively beat.
 - b. to row leisurely along the shore.
 - c. to gather up wood for winter.
 - d. to crouch close to the ground.
 - e. to trip and fall in the deep snow.

12. In Newfoundland, what does "a time" refer to:
- a. period between dinner and dessert.
 - b. a bountiful season of plenty.
 - c. a house party.
 - d. a raging storm.
 - e. an upcoming election campaign.
13. In many outport communities, a "stage" refers to:
- a. a tool for carving.
 - b. a jagged edge on a seashore cliff.
 - c. a long plank used to get up onto a boat's deck.
 - d. a building made of logs, used for cleaning fish.
 - e. a rough step used to get up to one's front door.
14. What are "vamps?"
- a. work boots
 - b. wool mittens
 - c. hair ribbons
 - d. fancy gloves.
 - e. wool socks
15. A "yaffel" is:
- a. a deep-sea fishing net
 - b. a tiny wooden boat
 - c. an iron cooking pot
 - d. an arm full of fish
 - e. a fast approaching storm
16. "Old man's beard" is used in reference to:
- a. the scruff on a man's chin.
 - b. yellowish coloured moss on trees.
 - c. a plate of spaghetti.
 - d. cobwebs in a window frame.
 - e. ice hanging from the face of a rock cliff.
17. A "scuff" is:
- a. an evil person.
 - b. a work break.
 - c. a rough spot on the road.
 - d. a jagged rock
 - e. a lively dance.

18. "Panny-hoppin" is:
- a. the game of hopscotch.
 - b. a traditional outport dance.
 - c. jumping from one small piece of ice to another.
 - d. the game of leap-frog on the beach sand.
 - e. a traditional method of frying fish in outport communities.
19. What is a "piss-a-bed?"
- a. a drunken man
 - b. a flower
 - c. a soiled mattress
 - d. a lazy person
 - e. a cat's litter box
20. "Jigg's dinner" refers to:
- a. a hearty breakfast.
 - b. a medicinal compound given to sick persons.
 - c. a meal of boiled beef and vegetables.
 - d. a bed time lunch.
 - e. a popular treat -- deep fried cod and fries.
21. "Birch broom in fits" is an expression used with reference to:
- a. a person who never stops talking.
 - b. a broom with too short a handle.
 - c. a person laughing loudly at a joke.
 - d. a small boat caught in a storm.
 - e. a person's messy hair.
22. A "boil up" is:
- a. a wind at sea that suddenly begins to gust heavily.
 - b. going into the country and cooking food outdoors.
 - c. a political argument between neighbouring communities.
 - d. a disagreement that becomes too heated.
 - e. cooking vegetables for Sunday dinner.
23. A "sleiveen" is a:
- a. deceitful person.
 - b. small rope used to fasten a boat to the pier.
 - c. sled which is used to carry wood.
 - d. small fish used for bait.
 - e. very miserly person.

24. What are "toutons?"
- a. pieces of fried bread dough
 - b. fish that have been salted heavily
 - c. young mischievous boys
 - d. homemade slippers
 - e. dried up mud holes
25. A "bologna license" is:
- a. the permission to speak in a group discussion.
 - b. a permit to jig cod for one's own family.
 - c. a license to drive a heavy equipment vehicles.
 - d. a boater's permit to tie up to the wharf.
 - e. a permit to hunt a male moose.
26. What is a "raspberry grunt?"
- a. a fruit flavoured ice-cream custard
 - b. a bucket for picking berries
 - c. a homemade candy stick
 - d. a square shaped berry dessert
 - e. a hearty breakfast roll
27. Besides meaning "askew" or "not straight", the term "crooked" can mean:
- a. happy.
 - b. miserly.
 - c. contrary.
 - d. excited.
 - e. anxious.
28. Newfoundland was settled because of which resource?
- a. cod
 - b. iron ore
 - c. lumber
 - d. copper
 - e. whale oil
29. "Don't be coddin yourself" means:
- a. don't be underestimating your ability.
 - b. don't be bragging about your accomplishments.
 - c. don't be taking yourself so seriously.
 - d. don't be fooling yourself.
 - e. don 't be scolding yourself.

30. A "crackie" is:
- a. a biscuit to have with tea.
 - b. a colourful noise maker for Christmas dinner.
 - c. a noisy crow.
 - d. a small ill-tempered dog.
 - e. a tea cup with a small crack.

Key

1.	d	7.	b	13.	d	19.	b	25.	e
2.	c	8.	d	14.	e	20.	c	26.	d
3.	b	9.	b	15.	d	21.	e	27.	c
4.	e	10.	a	16.	b	22.	b	28.	a
5.	e	11.	d	17.	e	23.	a	29.	d
6.	d	12.	c	18.	c	24.	a	30.	d