

# Language Proficiency Levels

Issues related to language proficiency have received serious and sustained consideration over the past twenty-five years or more in education circles in the United States, related to: 1) the acquisition of English by English learners in states with significant numbers of immigrants, 2) the goal of reaching higher levels in world languages including Advanced Placement courses for secondary schools, and 3) how to determine entrance requirements at the college level for foreign students. In addition, the business world and workplaces including government agencies also require methods for determining multiple language proficiency as interactions increase between and among various language groups across the globe.

Definitions of language proficiency vary considerably depending upon the people using the term, their perspectives and purposes. This article will address some of the general background information related to language proficiency levels overall in order to clarify the matter as it relates to school children acquiring or learning world languages in the public schools.

## HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

The vice-chancellor of the Directorate of Evaluation and Standards at the Defense Language Institute, Monterey, California, Dr. Martha Herzog, wrote a brief history of language proficiency scales or levels. In this history, she stated that the foreign language competence of United States government employees was not examined at all during the first 175 years of the nation's existence. The US Constitution does not address issues of education, and perhaps due to the feeling of security provided by the Atlantic Ocean, or a supply of multilingual immigrants sufficient to fill the needs of the nation—the State Department in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century had few employees and only one part-time translator—issues of language development did not receive much attention.

Among the first efforts to standardize the evaluation of language proficiency were those of the United States government after World War II. Until that time, the federal government did not have a well-developed method for judging language skills. From the founding of the nation until World War I, language use by the great majority of Americans was a matter of home and locale. Of course, English was the nation's majority language and the language of government, by consensus if not fiat; it was not imposed on anyone, and local newspapers and school boards were free to offer periodicals and coursework in German, Polish, Swedish, French, Spanish and other home languages wherever the community supported it. However, fears of treason and the perception of treason during the First World War lead to a precipitous decline and even disappearance of German and other language schools and newspapers.

Along with these schools and newspapers, the linguistic skills of previous generations began to disappear. By the time of the Second World War, the United States had relatively little left of many of these immigrant groups' linguistic resources, and certainly very little that was formally developed and nurtured through the public schools. This

may be attributed to some extent on the language teaching approach common to the time period: grammar-translation. Grammar-translation methods rarely, if ever, resulted in communicative competence or even intermediate fluency. Even highly educated college graduates of the time were more likely to read and write a language other than English than to have high levels of listening comprehension or oral communication skills. Mark Twain had said, during the previous generation of Americans, that although he had studied intermediate French in school, when he visited France he found out that no one there spoke intermediate French. He is quoted as saying, “In Paris they simply stared when I spoke to them in *French*; I never did succeed in making those idiots understand their own language.”

Historically, opposition to the use of languages other than English in the United States has been motivated by fears about immigrants (including as foreigners in their own land both the indigenous American Indians and the Spanish colonists who came to the Americas before the English) or competing power groups, as implied by Benjamin Franklin in anti-German comments made in articles and letters written in Pennsylvania during the 1750s. Over the centuries, the US and state governments have frequently acted in an equivocal way when it comes to language issues. For example, the first official translation of the Star Spangled Banner into Spanish was sponsored by the Bureau of Education in 1919 at the same time that many states were formally outlawing the public use of foreign languages, especially German.

According to Iowa Pathways, an online resource of Iowa Public Television, the State of Iowa was particularly extreme. The excerpt below was adapted from original article in *The Goldfinch* 3, No. 2 (Nov. 1981). Iowa City: State Historical Society of Iowa.

Because the United States was at war with Germany, those of German heritage were the main targets of suspicion. Soon German language instruction was banned in public schools. Then, parochial schools were forced to use only English in their classrooms. The churches were next, and eventually Iowa's Governor Harding declared that only English was legal in public and private schools, public places and over the telephone.

It is documented that four women in Le Claire, Iowa were arrested and fined for speaking to each other in German over the telephone. Rather than experience this distrust and lack of respect, many German-speaking Americans gave up their German language at this time.

Less than a generation later, conflicts began to bubble and boil again, this time across the Pacific and the Atlantic. Japan invaded China in 1937, Germany invaded Poland in 1939 and then France in 1940, and Japan invaded French Indochina later that year. Consequently, military and government officials in the United States began to prepare for a need for language experts to assist in military intelligence, diplomatic, and espionage efforts.

One of the first teachers of the Japanese language for the US military during World War II, Shigeya Kihara, acknowledged that his own Japanese language skills were at the “kitchen” level—he mostly knew words related to home life from his parents and although he had attended weekend school in Japanese throughout his elementary and high school years, he had not been educated in the finer points of the language. Other Army language teachers, such as Harry Fukuhara, had received a secondary education in Japan along with their primary education in the United States, making them bilcultural and biliterate.

In a 1991 interview, cited in the January 23, 2005 obituary in the Los Angeles Times, Kihara related the beginnings of the Defense Language Institute as follows:

*A UC Berkeley professor suggested that he take the job teaching Japanese to soldiers. His nisei students were thought to possess Japanese language skills but in many cases didn't.*

*Kihara reported to the 4th Army Intelligence officer at the Presidio of San Francisco. A week later, Kihara received an appointment to the U.S. Civil Service as a civilian Army employee and instructor in Japanese.*

*In a 1991 interview with the Herald, Kihara called the government's decision to start the language school "unprecedented."*

*"Heretofore, Japanese Americans were considered second-class citizens, linked to Japan and not to be trusted," he said. "Here they were asked to do something of vital service to the United States, very critical not only for the U.S. Army but for Japanese Americans."*

*None of the original four instructors had any teacher training or experience, he recalled.*

*"I spoke 'kitchen Japanese' at home and had gone to the Japanese-language school in Oakland in elementary and high school, and while I was at UC Berkeley," he said. "Some who were more qualified were reluctant to get involved, for fear of being ostracized."*

During World War II, the language school was moved to Camp Savage, Minnesota, about 25 miles south of Minneapolis, where its name was changed to the Military Intelligence Service Language School. The first language class there started in June of 1942. By war's end, nearly 6,000 linguists had graduated from the school and gone on to serve the military and related government services. Following the war, in 1946, the school was moved back to California to the Presidio of Monterey, where it was renamed the Army Language School and added nine other languages to the curriculum.

## LEARNING FROM THE PAST, BUILDING FOR THE FUTURE

After World War II was over, a war in Korea followed the world war with Germany, Italy, and Japan. Americans' lack of competence in other languages was recognized as a serious problem. In 1952, the federal government directed the Civil Service Commission to conduct an inventory of the various language abilities of Government employees and create a register listing these employees' language skills, background, and experiences related to language and culture.

However, the Commission had no system for actually conducting much less creating an inventory; there was no proficiency test, and there were no criteria for test development. What the Commission did have were employees' grades in language courses in their personnel files and self-assessments on their job applications. Self-assessments were likely to state something like "fluent in German" or "excellent French." A system for comparing grades across institutions of higher education did not exist in the United States. The Commission recommended a system that was objective, could be used for all languages and all positions in the Civil Service, and would not be tied to any specific curriculum. Because academia did not have a system to do this, the Government had to create one in order to meet the needs of the military, Civil Service, and Foreign Service.

At first, implementing this project was controversial. Government agencies were concerned that they would lose control and autonomy, and it was clear that testing existing employees could result in embarrassment if people's test scores contradicted their self-assessment forms indicating they were "fluent" or "excellent."

In the 1950s, the Foreign Service Institute (FSI) coordinated an interagency committee that developed a single scale from 1 to 6. This first scale did not distinguish among the four domains of language (listening, speaking, reading, writing) but simply rated "language." This new scale was used in 1955 to survey FSI officers. Unfortunately, fewer than half of the officers surveyed were found to have reached a level of proficiency in any language that was deemed useful to the Foreign Service. In 1956, the Secretary of State announced a new language policy with the requirement that language ability "will be verified by tests." In 1958, proficiency tests were made "mandatory" for all Foreign Service Officers.

The first FSI scale test results were not considered reliable. Testers found it difficult to apply the scale consistently, so results were varied. These tests were considered subjective and thought to be easier in certain languages compared to others. In spite of problems with the initial implementation, valuable lessons were learned from the experience.

FSI continued to build upon new knowledge to refine and revise the test and the scale. One key decision that has had important ramifications over the past fifty years involved changing from a single scale for "language" to four individual scales for each domain or sub-skill. The scale was eventually standardized to six basic levels ranging from 0 (= no functional ability) to 5 (= equivalent to an educated native speaker). The next

development was a structured interview in direct support of the 6-point scale. This innovation led to a framework for checking inter-rater reliability, and a high degree of consistency in scoring resulted. The interview soon became the standard method of testing at FSI.

### **CONTINUED IMPROVEMENT ON A PROFICIENCY SCALE**

Once the FSI reached this level of sophistication and success, other government agencies adopted the FSI system, including the Peace Corps for assessing its overseas volunteers. In 1968, several agencies cooperated in writing formal descriptions of the basic levels of the four domains. The FSI scale became part of the United States Government Personnel Manual.

Efforts to improve the FSI scale continued. In 1976, NATO adopted a language proficiency scale related to the 1968 document. By 1985, the US FSI document had been revised and refined under the auspices of the Interagency Language Roundtable (ILR) to include full descriptions of the “plus” levels that had worked their way into the scoring system over time. The official Government Language Skill Level Descriptions have been known as the “ILR Scale” or the “ILR Definitions.”

During the 1970s, the Peace Corps entered into an agreement with the Educational Testing Service (ETS) to develop instructional materials and procedures for training in-country target language-native Peace Corps staff to conduct and rate the "FSI"-type interview. An initiative was launched to disseminate a series of Testing Kit Workshops to share the procedures with college and university language teachers. This initiative resulted in academic leaders in the foreign language education field becoming familiar with the basic concepts and procedures of oral interview testing.

The academic world, including public school and institutions of higher education, had formed a professional organization derived from the Modern Language Association (MLA) to focus on the teaching and learning of world languages in all levels of schooling in 1967. This organization is called the American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages (ACTFL) and it continues to be influential in the field. Members of ACTFL and the language teaching profession are dedicated to the promotion of language learning, multilingualism, cultural understanding, and international competence.

In the late 1970s, ACTFL and the United States government's ILR worked together to create a set of proficiency standards largely through the oral interview. At the time it was seen as a welcome step in the direction of coming to consensus about how to judge how skilled a person is in any particular language, to be able to express that “skill level in terms that are approximately equivalent from one language to another” (Lambert). With its potential for feedback on the classroom instructional process, and in particular for guiding that process toward teaching real life skills instead of particular textual and classroom materials, it already represents a major step forward. ACTFL developed and published Proficiency Guidelines based on the ILR definitions.

Like the ILR scale, the ACTFL guidelines have undergone continuous improvement. ACTFL also developed the Oral Proficiency Interview (OPI) similar to the FSI test and began training educators to test their students according to the ACTFL scale. The two proficiency-testing systems are now generally considered to be complementary.

Currently, federal government agencies utilize the ILR Definitions as the standard measurement guidelines of language proficiency. However, specific testing tasks and procedures differ in some minor ways from one agency to another from the Defense Language Institute (DLI) to the language school of the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) for operational reasons.

## **MEASURING LANGUAGE PROFICIENCY IN ACADEMIC SETTINGS**

In the late 1970s, a Common Yardstick project was convened under a US Department of Education grant to bring together both academic and government agency representatives along with the Educational Testing Service (ETS) to review and discuss the "FSI test" and predict its potential as a shared metric for government and academic settings. The group endorsed the measurement concepts of the FSI interview but it was aware that the 0-5 level rating scale, in spite of the 'plus' values, was not detailed enough to reflect relatively modest improvements in language performance that could be expected to be the norm in the typical high- school or college level language study. The Common Yardstick participants proposed a modified continuum, later elaborated and jointly adopted by the ACTFL and ETS. Under this new "ACTFL/ETS" scale, the level 0 to 0+ range of the FSI scale was divided into three classifications (Novice-Low, Novice-Mid, Novice-High), with the level 1 range in turn broken into Intermediate-Low and Intermediate-Mid categories. The basic functional meanings of Levels 1+ through 2+ were retained in the ACTFL/ETS scale but were re-designated as Intermediate-High, Advanced, and Advanced-Plus. A 'Superior' category on the ACTFL/ETS scale was adopted to include all 3-and higher levels of the FSI scale.

In the context of the OPI, 'accuracy' describes the extent of phonological and syntactical precision achieved by the person being assessed. In addition, 'text type' refers to the discourse complexity of the test taker, such as whether the person speaks in discrete words, phrases, unconnected sentences or extended, planned paragraphs.

The OPI test administrator's training manual defines the OPI as: ". . . a standardized procedure for the global assessment of functional speaking ability or oral proficiency." However, it does not include a definition of the 'oral proficiency' provided by the test. Van Lier (1989) goes so far as to critique it this way: "oral proficiency consists of those aspects of communicative competence that are displayed and rated in oral proficiency interviews."

## **MEASURING LANGUAGE PROFICIENCY IN WORK SETTINGS**

Many American businesses have begun to measure employees' proficiency in languages other than English during the past twenty years, with a primary interest in Spanish as a language necessary to reach a growing percentage of customers, patients, and clients. Other languages may be necessary to other businesses, such as an investment bank that does business throughout Europe and has an office in San Francisco. In both cases, employers initially measured language proficiency informally, by having an existing employee with knowledge of the language ask a question or two during the interview process. In some cases, there is no assessment at all and the prospective employee's self-assessment on the employment application is accepted. For small companies this may still be the case. However, larger corporations now utilize screening and assessment services to determine levels of proficiency in the languages needed for their business.

### **WHAT IS LANGUAGE PROFICIENCY?**

As discussed, during the past fifty years or more, ways of measuring language proficiency have been developed and refined in the United States, for both government, business, and academic purposes, yet definitions of language proficiency vary considerably depending upon the people using the term, their perspectives and purposes. As stated earlier, before the existence of the testing procedures, government employees often reported their own level of proficiency. In those days, learning another language meant using the dictionary to find word-by-word translations, studying aspects of grammar, learning parts of speech, words, and phrases by rote memory, and developing the ability to discern and produce the sound system of the language in order to encode and decode messages. Perhaps the simplest definition of language proficiency is simply a measure of what someone knows and can do (listen, speak, read, or write) in a particular language.

The FSI scale contains six levels of language learning proficiency.

**Level 0: NO PROFICIENCY IN THE LANGUAGE** – A person at this level of proficiency has not been exposed to the language being measured and knows no words in it or very few words.

**Level 1: ELEMENTARY PROFICIENCY** – A person at this level of proficiency knows dozens even hundreds of words and can order meals, be polite, ask and answer very simple questions about very familiar topics, tell time, and other simple tasks. However, s/he will likely have many errors in pronunciation.

**Level 2: LIMITED WORKING PROFICIENCY** – A person at this level of proficiency has a productive vocabulary of many hundreds of words and can use the language in most basic social situations and can also handle basic work requirements. He or she can talk about current events, himself/herself, and his/her family. However, s/he likely has a definite foreign accent.

Level 3: PROFESSIONAL WORKING PROFICIENCY – A person at this level of proficiency has a productive vocabulary of a few thousand words and can use the language in most social and work situations, both formal or informal. Such a person can understand most speech at a normal rate of speed and has a very large receptive vocabulary to draw from. Although s/he may still have an accent, it is not a distraction to listeners.

Level 4: FULL PROFESSIONAL PROFICIENCY – A person at this level of proficiency has a productive vocabulary of several thousand words including words specific to the lexicon of his/her profession. He or she can use the language accurately and precisely in almost all language environments. He or she can informally interpret to and from the language rarely making pronunciation or grammar mistakes.

Level 5: NATIVE-LIKE PROFICIENCY – A person at this level will have a productive and receptive vocabulary equivalent to that of a well-educated native speaker, including the communicative competence necessary to make relevant cultural references and use idioms properly.

### **MEASURING LANGUAGE PROFICIENCY IN SCHOOL SETTINGS**

In the academic setting, this grammar-translation approach to teaching foreign languages has been ineffective at best and damaging at worst. Some secondary language teachers report high rates of attrition in traditional language courses, with very few students continuing past graduation or college-entrance requirements. When surveyed informally, the vast majority of monolingual adults in the United States, who were in American high schools from the 1940s to 1980s, admit to having retained little or no proficiency in the language(s) they studied. Many of these adults felt so unsuccessful that they believe they are “bad at languages” or “not able to learn languages.” Of course, they are using their first language well in order to make that statement, yet the irony seems lost on them.

In the 1970s, secondary teachers across the United States enthusiastically embraced new approaches and methods to learning language. In California, many schools installed “language laboratories” and purchased new curricula and instructional materials based on the “audio-lingual method.” The language lab held the potential for the teacher to listen into the student’s practice remotely and evaluate proficiency, yet that potential was rarely realized. Most students did not advance to a high enough level for proficiency to be measured, although if they did their homework and studied for the multiple-choice test, they may very well have earned an ‘A’ or a ‘B’ in the course. Many adults will testify that they earned good grades in their language classes yet they cannot function in the real world using the language.

Making major inroads in the early 1980s, work by psychologists and linguists such as Stephen Krashen, James Asher, James Cummins, Michael Long, Merrill Swain, and others led to reforms in the way languages were taught in the school setting, especially English to speakers of other languages. Krashen and Terrell’s “The Natural Approach,”



Asher’s “Total Physical Response,” and insights on reaching high levels of communicative competence from Cummins, Long, Swain, and others were shared through multi-district trainings often supported financially through grants from state and federal governments.

As part of the research that led to the development of the Natural Approach, Stephen Krashen developed stages of second language acquisition that became the bedrock of English and other language instruction in bilingual programs in California schools.

### **Krashen/Terrell: Stages of Second Language Acquisition**

<b>Stage</b>	<b>Characteristics</b>	<b>Approximate Time Frame</b>	<b>Teacher Prompts</b>
<i>Preproduction</i> aka “The Silent Period”	The student <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Has minimal comprehension</li> <li>• Does not verbalize</li> <li>• Nods “Yes” and “No”</li> <li>• Draws and points</li> </ul>	0–6 months	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Show me...</li> <li>• Circle the...</li> <li>• Where is...?</li> <li>• Who has...?</li> </ul>
<i>Early Production</i>	The student <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Has limited comprehension</li> <li>• Produces one- or two-word responses</li> <li>• Participates using key words and familiar phrases</li> <li>• Uses present-tense verbs</li> </ul>	6 months–1 year	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Yes/no questions</li> <li>• Either/or questions</li> <li>• One- or two-word answers</li> <li>• Lists</li> <li>• Labels</li> </ul>
<i>Speech Emergence</i>	The student <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Has good comprehension</li> <li>• Can produce simple sentences</li> <li>• Makes grammar and pronunciation errors</li> <li>• Misunderstands jokes</li> </ul>	1–3 years	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Why...?</li> <li>• How...?</li> <li>• Explain...</li> <li>• Phrase or short-sentence answers</li> </ul>
<i>Intermediate Fluency</i>	The student <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Has excellent comprehension</li> <li>• Makes few grammatical errors</li> </ul>	3–5 years	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• What would happen if...?</li> <li>• Why do you think...?</li> </ul>
<i>Advanced Fluency</i>	The student has a near-native level of speech.	5–7 years	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Decide if...</li> <li>• Retell...</li> </ul>

*Source:* Adapted from Krashen and Terrell (1983).

The process for developing proficiency was becoming understood. How to measure language proficiency in the schools, however, was, until the late-1990s, most often left to individual school districts to decide. As a result, many tests were developed, often as

commercial products, to assess the language skills of students in all-English as well as bilingual programs. Tests such as the Language Assessment Scale (LAS) are available in English and Spanish from CTB McGraw-Hill as is the Woodcock-Múñoz Language Survey-Revised from Houghton-Mifflin's Riverside Press; the IPT from Ballard & Tighe and the PEM from Pearson Education are used to measure English proficiency for students learning English at school.

Another form of assessment of language proficiency was developed to evaluate the proficiency in the home language for students who were entering public schools with no or limited English skills. For Spanish-speaking students, a version of the LAS was developed in Spanish. For most other languages, schools and districts have often used the Student Oral Language Observation Matrix (SOLOM). The SOLOM is a rating scale or rubric that teachers or even parents or other adults use to provide a rough estimate of the student's language proficiency related to listening comprehension, vocabulary, fluency, grammar, and pronunciation. The SOLOM is not a commercial product; it was originally developed by the San Jose Area Bilingual Consortium and has undergone revisions with leadership from the Bilingual Education Office of the California Department of Education. It is within the public domain and can be copied, modified, or adapted to meet local needs. An example follows:

STUDENT ORAL LANGUAGE OBSERVATION MATRIX (SOLOM)					
Student's Name:			Grade:	Examiner's Signature:	
Language Observed:			Date:		
	A. Comprehension	B. Fluency	C. Vocabulary	D. Pronunciation	E. Grammar
1	Cannot be said to understand even simple conversation.	Speech is so halting and fragmentary as to make conversation virtually impossible.	Vocabulary limitations so extreme as to make conversation virtually impossible.	Pronunciation problems so severe as to make speech virtually impossible.	Errors in grammar and word order so severe as to make speech virtually unintelligible.
2	Has great difficulty following what is said. Can comprehend only "social conversation" spoken slowly and with frequent repetitions.	Usually hesitant; often forced into silence by language limitations.	Misuse of words and very limited vocabulary make comprehension quite difficult.	Very hard to understand because of pronunciation problems. Must frequently repeat in order to make himself/herself understood.	Grammar and word order errors make comprehension difficult. Must often rephrase and/or restrict himself/herself to basic patterns.
3	Understands most of what is said at slower-than normal speed with repetitions.	Speech in everyday conversation and classroom discussion is frequently disrupted by the student's search for the correct manner of expression.	Frequently uses the wrong words; conversation somewhat limited because of inadequate vocabulary.	Pronunciation problems necessitate concentration on the part of the listener and occasionally lead to misunderstanding.	Makes frequent errors of grammar and word order, which occasionally obscure meaning.

4	Understands nearly everything at normal speech, although occasional repetition may be necessary.	Speech in everyday conversation and classroom discussions is generally fluent, with occasional lapses while the student searches for the correct manner of expression.	Occasionally uses inappropriate terms and/or must rephrase ideas because of lexical inadequacies.	Always intelligible, though one is conscious of a definite accent and occasional inappropriate patterns.	Occasionally makes grammatical and/or word-order errors which do not obscure meaning.
5	Understands everyday conversation and normal classroom discussions without difficulty.	Speech in everyday conversation and classroom discussions is fluent and effortless approximating that of a native speaker.	Use of vocabulary and idioms approximates that of a native speaker.	Pronunciation and intonation approximates that of a native speaker.	Grammatical usage and word order approximates that of a native speaker.

## CALIFORNIA'S STATEWIDE MEASURE OF LANGUAGE PROFICIENCY

California educators and legislators were actively reforming schools through the accountability and standards movements of the late 1990s. As a result, the State developed a test of English proficiency (specifically for non- or limited-English proficient students learning English in the schools) based on the new English Language Development Standards (ELD) called the California ELD Test (CELDT). CELDT was developed under a contract with CTB McGraw-Hill and was first administered in 2001. Administering the CELDT was a labor-intensive process and often required 1-2 hours of one-on-one interaction between a carefully trained test administrator and the student. State law (*Education Code* sections 313 and 60810) and federal law (Title III of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act [ESEA]) require that school districts administer a state test of English language proficiency (1) to newly enrolled students whose primary language is not English and (2) to students who are English learners as an annual assessment. For California public school students, this test is the California English Language Development Test (CELDT).

The CELDT (instituted by *Education Code* sections 313 and 60810[d]) has three purposes:

- To identify students who are limited English proficient
- To determine the level of English language proficiency of students who are limited English proficient
- To assess the progress of limited English proficient students in acquiring the skills of listening, reading, speaking, and writing in English.

The CELDT describes proficiency levels in documents found on the California Department of Education website (<http://www.cde.ca.gov/ta/tg/el/celdtfaq.asp>) as follows:

### **CELDT Overall Performance Level Descriptors**

**Beginning (level 1)** — Students performing at this level of English language proficiency may demonstrate little or no receptive or productive English skills. They are beginning to understand a few concrete details during unmodified instruction. They may be able to respond to some communication and learning demands, but with many errors. Oral and written production is usually limited to disconnected words and memorized statements and questions. Frequent errors make communication difficult.

**Early Intermediate (level 2)** — Students performing at this level of English language proficiency continue to develop receptive and productive English skills. They are able to identify and understand more concrete details during unmodified instruction. They may be able to respond with increasing ease to more varied communication and learning demands with a reduced number of errors. Oral and written production is usually limited to phrases and memorized statements and questions. Frequent errors still reduce communication.

**Intermediate (level 3)** — Students performing at this level of English language proficiency begin to tailor their English–language skills to meet communication and learning demands with increasing accuracy. They are able to identify and understand more concrete details and some major abstract concepts during unmodified instruction. They are able to respond with increasing ease to more varied communication and learning demands with a reduced number of errors. Oral and written production has usually expanded to sentences, paragraphs, and original statements and questions. Errors still complicate communication.

**Early Advanced (level 4)** — Students performing at this level of English language proficiency begin to combine the elements of the English language in complex, cognitively demanding situations and are able to use English as a means for learning in content areas. They are able to identify and summarize most concrete details and abstract concepts during unmodified instruction in most content areas. Oral and written production is characterized by more elaborate discourse and fully developed paragraphs and compositions. Errors are less frequent and rarely complicate communication.

**Advanced (level 5)** — Students performing at this level of English language proficiency communicate effectively with various audiences on a wide range of familiar and new topics to meet social and learning demands. In order for students at this level to attain the English-proficiency level of their native

English-speaking peers, further linguistic enhancement and refinement are still necessary. Students at this level are able to identify and summarize concrete details and abstract concepts during unmodified instruction in all content areas. Oral and written production reflects discourse appropriate for content areas. Errors are infrequent and do not reduce communication.

The CELDT domains and test components are as follows: listening (strategies and applications); speaking (strategies and applications); reading (word analysis, fluency and systematic vocabulary development, reading comprehension, literary response and analysis); and Writing (strategies and applications, English–language conventions).

To assess these categories of proficiency, the following types of questions are used:

**Listening** – Following oral directions, extended listening comprehension (passage), rhyming, listening comprehension (short, school situation)

**Speaking** – Oral vocabulary, speech functions, choosing and giving reasons, four-picture narrative

**Reading** – alphabet recognition, word analysis, fluency and systematic, vocabulary development, reading comprehension, literary analysis

**Writing** – writing words, grammar and structure, writing sentences, writing a short composition

It is clear that California’s efforts in designing and implementing the CELDT resulted in serious work and careful study by hundreds of experts in psychology, linguistics, assessment, curriculum and instruction. The CELDT continues to be a work in progress, adding to the knowledge base of how to measure language proficiency.

## **TEST OF ENGLISH AS A FOREIGN LANGUAGE (TOEFL)**

The Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL) is a product of the Educational Testing Service, a nonprofit organization focused on the research and development of assessment tools. ETS develops, administers and scores more than 50 million tests annually in more than 180 countries, at more than 9,000 locations worldwide. The TOEFL is widely used by colleges, universities, and agencies all over the world to evaluate the English proficiency of prospective students or employees.

The TOEFL proficiency levels are reported in 5-point increments from 0-500 for each of the domains measured, including an integrated domain portion in which test takers read, listen, and respond in writing or speech to questions.

**Level 1** – scale score 0-225

**Level 2** – scale score 226-275

**Level 3** – scale score 276-325

**Level 4** – scale score 326-375

**Level 5** – scale score 376-500

## MEASURES OF FOREIGN LANGUAGE PROFICIENCY

As the importance of testing and accountability in all areas of public schooling have increased, so too have the variety of assessment tools. For the purposes of this article, two examples will be shared and described.

Center for Applied Linguistics (CAL) – CAL offers several assessment tools depending on the needs of the organization, from tools for evaluating young children’s proficiency in a new language at school to adults in professional settings.

One of the more common assessment tools from CAL is the SOPA, or Student Oral Proficiency Assessment, which was loosely derived from the ACTFL OPI. The SOPA is an assessment tool for children in grades K-7. SOPA is used in a variety of programs, including partial immersion, total immersion, two-way immersion, and content-based, non-immersion FLES programs.

SOPA is designed as an interview that elicits conversational speech. Students’ performance is measured holistically by determining patterns of strengths and weaknesses. The interviewer probes for the students’ highest level of listening comprehension and oral fluency while ensuring that students feel they have completed the interview tasks successfully.

The rating is based on the American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages (ACTFL) Proficiency Guidelines. The rubric has three main levels, Junior Novice, Junior Intermediate, and Junior Advanced, which are divided into sublevels (low, mid, and high). It is not an achievement test, nor is it tied to any specific program of study.

The practice may be, for example, to give a SOPA assessment to a sampling of 3rd and 5th graders each year at a school with an immersion or content-based non-immersion (FLES) program. Two teachers work in tandem with two students. One teacher is the interviewer and the other the recorder. The interviewer leads the two children through a series of tasks designed to gather information on how students use language, in other words, their proficiency levels. It has been a powerful tool to drive instructional and curricular improvements including improved student achievement. There are a number of protocols associated with these assessments. Following is the basic structure of the SOPA interview according to Zeppieri:

**Task 1: Warm-up** Teacher uses a bag of brightly colored small animals, shapes, or other objects that students can easily name. He/She asks students to find a pink elephant or a green circle, to find 5 blue triangles, etc. Next, the teacher might ask students to name the items. *(The goal of this task is to put students at ease as they follow very familiar directions with very familiar vocabulary. So, the objects need*

*to reflect the district curriculum.)*

**Task 2: Oral questions** These are familiar questions based on the curriculum that might include names, ages, family members, birthdates, etc.

**Task 3: Giving instructions, describing** Usually, the teacher has a visual of a scene related to the curriculum and leads children through a series of tasks that involve them in following directions (put the mother in the living room next to the sofa, put the girl on top of her desk, etc.) and then gives children the chance to give directions to one another. Further, children have a chance to describe the scene.

**Task 4: Re-telling stories** Using pictures or props, students re-tell a story; possibly one they learned as part of the curriculum or one that they make up using familiar vocabulary and structures.

### **STAMP (Standards-based Measurement of Proficiency)**

Another method of assessing language proficiency is through use of the Standards-based Measurement of Proficiency, or STAMP, by Avant Assessment in Eugene, Oregon. The company states on their website the mission to provide “innovative language assessment solutions that empower informed decision making by merging expertise in assessment, linguistics and technology.”

Avant works closely with its research partner, the Center for Applied Second Language Studies (CASLS), a National Foreign Language Resource Center, at the University of Oregon. This partnership brings the research power of the university together with the focus and resources of a market-driven business entity. In 2005 CASLS was appointed by the National Security Education Program to oversee the Chinese K-16 Flagship Language program in Oregon, under the National Flagship Language Initiative. Avant administers, scores, and reports results from the STAMP test (described below), the Web-based summative assessment that is a central element of the Oregon Chinese Flagship program.

Avant delivers, scores and reports results from the STAMP test (Standards-based Measurement of Proficiency), a ground-breaking Web-based, three-skills foreign language assessment based on US national proficiency guidelines. STAMP was developed and statistically validated by CASLS. Every year, over 50,000 students take the STAMP test in high schools and colleges throughout the US and overseas. Avant has worked directly with Departments of Education delivering STAMP in NJ, WY, DE, LA, KY, SC and HI. In addition, Avant provides the STAMP test to Department of Defense Education Agency, responsible for educating the dependents of US military personnel worldwide.

As with any automated product, there is the possibility that the students are not engaging appropriately with the machine. Nevertheless, it was reported to be a useful

tool by the director of a Foreign Language Assistance Program (FLAP) grant in New Jersey, as follows:

*We gave this assessment (STAMP) to our 8th graders for two years as part of a FLAP grant through the NJ Department of Education. I think it offers good feedback on students' proficiency, but as any assessment without an adult interlocutor, the results are not as good. Nonetheless, we got an idea of our students' strengths and weaknesses. The assessment has 3 parts: interpretive reading, presentational speaking (students respond to a prompt), and writing. (Zeppieri)*

## CONCLUSION

People will make statements such as, "I speak English," "I became fluent in Spanish in 3 months," "you can learn French in a week" or "I know Mandarin Chinese," yet mean very different things depending upon their educational level, cultural background and personality. Because of this, several systems of measurement of language ability or proficiency have been created and developed over time, such as International Language Roundtable (ILR) scale, formerly known as the Foreign Institute Service (FSI) scale, the Oral Proficiency Interview (OPI), Language Assessment Scales (LAS), the California English Language Development Test (CELDT), Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL), the Student Oral Language Observation Matrix (SOLOM) and Standards-based Measure of Proficiency (STAMP).

Depending on the purpose, then, one or more of these language proficiency scales and their associated tests or procedures will likely provide helpful information on how well the student or job applicant uses a particular language to communicate, study, research, or learn. If needed, these tests may be used regularly to assess progress or inform instruction.

## External Links

1. Government Interagency Language Roundtable (ILR)  
<http://www.govtilr.org/skills/index.htm>
2. University of Tennessee Martin article on the ILR  
<http://www.utm.edu/staff/globeg/ilrhome.shtml>
3. Japan Association for Language Teaching [http://jalt.org/test/yof\\_1.htm](http://jalt.org/test/yof_1.htm)
4. Defense Language Institute, Foreign Language Center  
<http://www.dliflc.edu/historyofdil.html>
5. United State Department of State  
[http://www.state.gov/www/about\\_state/history/dephis.html](http://www.state.gov/www/about_state/history/dephis.html)
6. Los Angeles Times Obituary Archive  
<http://pqasb.pqarchiver.com/latimes/access/782706771.html?FMT=ABS&FMT S=ABS:FT&type=current&date=Jan+23%2C+2005&author=Dennis+McLellan &pub=Los+Angeles+Times&edition=&startpage=B.14&desc=Obituaries%3B+Shigeya+Kihara%2C+90%3B+the+Last+Original+Teacher+at+Army%27s+1st+Language+School>



7. Iowa Public Television  
[http://www.iptv.org/iowapathways/mypath.cfm?ounid=ob\\_000202](http://www.iptv.org/iowapathways/mypath.cfm?ounid=ob_000202)
8. Association of Departments of Foreign Language  
<http://web2.adfl.org/adfl/bulletin/v16n3/163001.htm>
9. Teacher Proficiency through Reading and Storytelling Publisher  
<http://www.tprstorytelling.com/>
10. American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages <http://www.actfl.org>
11. Berlitz <http://www.berlitz.us/PPC/PPC-Landing-Corporate-Lanugage-Assessment-Training/204/>
12. Texas Education Agency  
[http://www.tea.state.tx.us/index3.aspx?id=3300&menu\\_id=793#telpas](http://www.tea.state.tx.us/index3.aspx?id=3300&menu_id=793#telpas)
13. Stephen Krashen's website  
[http://www.sdkrashen.com/SL\\_Acquisition\\_and\\_Learning/i.html](http://www.sdkrashen.com/SL_Acquisition_and_Learning/i.html)
14. Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development  
<http://www.ascd.org/publications/books/106009/chapters/The-Stages-of-Second-Language-Acquisition.aspx>
15. Timothy J. P. Mason website on linguistics and language teaching (France)  
<http://www.timothyjpmason.com>
16. California Department of Education <http://www.cde.ca.gov/ta/tg/el/>
17. Center for Applied Linguistics <http://www.cal.org/topics/ta/>

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