

LANGUAGE PROFICIENCY

What does it mean to know French or Spanish, Arabic or Chinese? As language teaching became more widespread in the second half of the 20th century, educators and researchers began to realize that learning lists of vocabulary words and grammar rules did not mean that an individual knew a language. The real question was what students could do with the language.

Both in the academic community and in government language schools, there was a search for a way to describe what students could do. The Foreign Service Institute (FSI) developed a proficiency scale for describing the speaking abilities of candidates for foreign service positions, as well as an interview-based evaluation procedure. This scale was refined for academic use during the 1970s and resulted in the Interagency Language Roundtable (ILR) scale. This scale expanded the lower levels of the original scale in order to be more precise in describing novice and intermediate language learners' proficiency (Hadley, 2001).

During the 1980s, the American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages (ACTFL) built on the ILR scale to create proficiency guidelines that define and measure language ability in speaking, reading, writing and listening. The scale moves from novice to intermediate to advanced and superior levels. It may be helpful to think of language learning in terms of an inverted pyramid (see figure 1). The further up the scale one moves, the more growth is required in language skill. In other words, moving from novice to intermediate requires relatively little positive change, while moving from intermediate to advanced requires much more (Hadley, 2001).

The levels of proficiency suggest the type of language or understanding that can be expected from someone at that level. However, at each level there will be variation in the speaker's performance. For example, not all novice-high speakers will be able to address the same topics with the same ease. In addition, those same speakers will begin to show some of the characteristics of intermediate speakers. They cannot, however, sustain performance at the higher level. This is true as well for intermediate-high speakers who show some of the characteristics of advanced speakers (Hadley, 2001).

The proficiency guidelines were initially designed to describe the language performance of adult language learners. ACTFL created its *Performance Guidelines for K-12 Learners* in order to describe characteristics of language users at various stages of learning and account for the various entry points for language study in the United States. Some students begin in elementary school, while others begin in middle or high school. Like the proficiency guidelines, the performance guidelines describe how well novice, intermediate and pre-advanced learners of a language function in the language (ACTFL, 1998).

ACTFL Performance and Proficiency Guidelines for Language Learners

