

What do we mean by proficiency?

When we talk about the term *proficiency* or *language proficiency*, we're concerned with (1) what an individual *can do* in the language and (2) *how well* he or she can do it using spontaneous, non-rehearsed language? For example, is Nancy sufficiently proficient in her new language to order a meal in a restaurant, explain a child's illness, or teach a class? And how well (accurately, fluently, appropriately) can she handle these tasks? Does her speech sound like she's in first grade or is her speech more like what is expected of an adult (complexity)? When trying to explain why he is living in his new country, can Bill just barely get the intended meaning across, perhaps by using short phrases or sentences that don't hang together well, or can he communicate without putting excessive burden on others to figure out what's being said?

Proficiency-oriented learning focuses on the learner's ability to use the language to accomplish real-life tasks (what a learner can do) and it is concerned with accuracy, fluency (smoothness), appropriateness, and degree of complexity (how well a learner can handle the task). In conversation, this means language that is used spontaneously, without the need to pause to rehearse before speaking.

Why do coaches need to know about proficiency-oriented learning?

Whatever our methods or approaches to language and culture learning, we need a framework for organizing (1) what learners will do, (2) the proficiency level involved, (3) how they will go about their learning experiences, (4) and how learning will be evaluated. Proficiency-oriented learning can provide this framework. It helps us keep a steady focus on preparing learners to handle real-life tasks through use of language that is fluent (smooth, without excessive hesitations), accurate, appropriate for the situation, and at the right level of complexity.

What are proficiency guidelines?

For a range of levels of language ability (called proficiency levels) and for each of the four skills (listening, speaking, reading, writing), several organizations have specified (1) what an individual should be able to do and (2) how well he/she can handle each task. The ILR Guidelines include a fifth area, culture.

Organization		Levels Specified
ACTFL	American Council of Teachers of Foreign Languages	Novice, Intermediate, Advanced, Superior, Distinguished, and sublevels
ILR (FSI)	Foreign Service Institute / Interagency Language Roundtable	0, 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, and sublevels
CLB	Canadian Language Benchmarks	Stage I: Basic (Levels 1-4) Stage II: Intermediate (Levels 5-8) Stage III: Advanced (Levels 9-12)
CEFR	Common European Framework of Reference	A1, A2 (Basic User) B1, B2 (Independent User) C1, C2 (Proficient User)

How can a set of guidelines shape learning and assessment?

1. As noted above, the framework for proficiency-oriented learning is a set of statements or guidelines that specify what learners should be able to do in the language, and how well, at different proficiency levels (e.g., Novice, Intermediate, Advanced, Superior) and for each of the four skills (listening, speaking, reading, writing).

For example, the ACTFL Guidelines for speaking state that one of the things Intermediate-High speakers should be able to do is "converse with ease and confidence when dealing with most routine tasks and social situations of the Intermediate level."

2. We use the descriptions of proficiency for the various levels to work backwards to describe (1) what a curriculum or learning plan should look like, (2) what components or content it should include and (3) what types of techniques and activities are likely to promote the most effective learning.

Building on the example in #1, above, a learning plan for those who are approaching the Intermediate-High level in speaking should include (a) information about how to participate in specific situations the learner is likely to encounter including appropriate vocabulary for the situation and other guidance, as needed, and (b) many and varied opportunities to practice conversing on these topics with others.

When we use a set of proficiency guidelines to plan our learning experiences, we are much more likely to include the types of activities that will prepare people for handling real-life tasks accurately and appropriately.

3. We use the descriptions of proficiency for the various levels to work backwards to describe how to design and use assessment tools to evaluate a learner's level of proficiency for each of the four skills. The Oral Proficiency Interview (OPI) and the Simulated Oral Proficiency Interview (SOPI) are examples of proficiency-oriented assessment tools. However, assessment does not need to be formal, but should also be an ongoing part of the learning experiences, so that the tasks the learner performs as part of the learning experience are the same or very similar to those used for more formal assessment.

Again building on the example in #1, above, these same learners should be assessed on their ability to converse about routine tasks in social situations—specifically, the everyday tasks that they will need to use in their daily interactions with others.

What does proficiency-oriented learning look like?

Alice Omaggio Hadley (pp. 90-91) presents five principles of proficiency-oriented learning, paraphrased below. Even though she writes for the classroom teacher, we can easily adapt these to other learning contexts. Some of the principles are exactly the opposite of what language specialists believed even 30 or 40 years ago. They are also different from what many language coaches were taught when they learned their target language, and they differ from what many on-field language teachers and tutors believe. However, nearly all of the best of today's language learning specialists whole-heartedly support these principles as ones learners should put into practice each day.

1. A proficiency-oriented program includes opportunities for learners to practice using authentic (real-life) language in a range of contexts (situations) likely to be encountered in the target culture.
 - Learners should work toward expressing personal meaning (saying what they want/need to say) as soon as possible.
 - Learners should be encouraged to communicate in the target language with each other.
 - Creative language practice (constructing on-the-spot what you want to say) should be a part of the program.
 - Authentic (not contrived) language should be used in practice activities wherever possible.
2. Opportunities should be provided for learners to practice carrying out a range of functions or speech acts likely to be necessary in dealing with others in the target culture. For example, greetings, apologies, invitations, requests.
3. The development of accurate speech (and, as appropriate, accurate writing) should be emphasized in the proficiency-oriented program. Learners should use a range of practice activities that focus on accuracy, and, in addition, evaluative feedback (observation, quizzes, self-report, etc.) can be useful in facilitating more precise and coherent language use.
4. The learning process should be responsive to the affective as well as the cognitive needs of students; their different personalities, preferences, and learning styles should be taken into account.
5. Cultural understanding must be promoted in various ways so that learners are sensitive to the target culture and are prepared to use the language in culturally appropriate ways..

References and Related Resources

CARLA (Center for Advanced Research on Language Acquisition), University of Minnesota. "Characteristics of Proficiency-Oriented Language Instruction." (<https://www.carla.umn.edu/>)

Omaggio Hadley, Alice. 2001. *Teaching Language in Context*, 3rd ed. Boston: Heinle & Heinle.

Orwig, Carol. 2013. "Self-Assessment Checklists." (These highly useful checklists are built on the ACTFL Proficiency Guidelines and ACTFL Proficiency Scale.)