

World Language Assessment FAQs

How is language proficiency measured?

There is no universal standard on describing proficiency in but there are scales for rating language ability. These scales can be different, depending on the language, context, need, or even country.

The [ACTFL Proficiency Guidelines](#) are the most common scale for K-12 schools in the United States. The ACTFL Proficiency Guidelines explain what people can do with language across the four skills at five major levels: Novice, Intermediate, Advanced, Superior, and Distinguished. The main levels of Novice, Intermediate, and Advanced are divided into Low, Mid, and High sublevels. The levels of the ACTFL Guidelines describe the range of proficiency from little or no practical ability to a highly articulate, well-educated language user.

Other language scales used in the United States include the Interagency Language Roundtable (ILR) scale, used for federal- and military-level service, ALTA's Language Testing Scale, the Sign Language Proficiency Interview (SLPI:ASL), and the American Sign Language Proficiency Interview (ASLPI).

Outside the United States, the Common European Framework of Reference for Language (CEFR) is used across the Eurasian continent, while many countries have their own levels and scales specific to their languages.

What are the four language areas?

In general, the four main language areas are listening/attending, speaking/signing, reading, and writing but they are not required as not every language will have all four. Another way to divide up the skills is by whether they require the user to produce or understand language.

How is proficiency different from performance?

Proficiency is the ability to use language in a real-world situation. Proficiency demonstrates what a language user is able to do regardless of where, when or how they learned the language.

Performance is the ability to use language in a limited and controlled situation, such as a classroom or on a specific test. Performance refers to language ability that has been practiced and is within familiar contexts and content areas.

Each skill has a role in language learning, but only proficiency is what people use to communicate in the real world. An assessment of proficiency determines if the language user provides enough evidence of all of the assessment criteria of a particular level according to the ACTFL Proficiency Guidelines. The individual must do everything expected at a level in a sustained fashion, that is, all of the time, in order to be rated at that level.