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Language Proficiency — What Is It? What Are Your Own Skills?

Over fifteen years ago the American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages, working with the Educational Testing Service and various governmental agencies involved in language training, published its landmark “Proficiency Guidelines.” Since then these descriptions of language competence have gained wide acceptance. First-year German and *Wie, bitte?* are organized to fit the “Guidelines” and the ideas about teaching that they imply.

The “Guidelines” cover speaking, listening, reading, writing, and cultural competence. They are not intended to define and help measure “book” knowledge of language, but rather practical ability. Below are excerpts from the standards for speaking and writing. Outstanding performance at the end of first-year German is characterized by Intermediate-Mid proficiency in speaking and writing. If you take two years of college German (=4 years junior/senior high-school), your skills will probably fall within the range from Intermediate-Mid to Advanced.

When you evaluate yourself, remember that you are rating your typical “maintenance” performance in a communicative situation, not your bare familiarity with some feature of the language as measured in isolated textbook exercises. That is, what can you do in real time,

whether face-to-face in conversation or when you must deliver a message in writing?

Similarly, the “Guidelines” for listening and reading at the intermediate and advanced levels emphasize the use of authentic speech or text materials, such as everyday conversation, simple broadcasts and business correspondence, and everyday news items.

You can also use the “Guidelines” as an outline for long-term study — which weaknesses to attack at your current level, how to work toward the next level, and what you might well pay less attention to until later.

Note that the levels do not represent steps of equal size; rather, the steps get larger and larger in terms of difficulty and likely learning time. Thus many first-year students reach Novice-Mid status during their first quarter or semester, but some people will not be Intermediate-Mid until well into the second year or even later, and Advanced-Plus proficiency may not be attained even at the completion of a college major in German. A realistic goal for motivated college German students is Advanced speaking and writing proficiency after three years of study. At that level, they can use what their proficiency to do accomplish a wide range of useful functions in an adult world.

Speaking

Novice — Low Unable to function in the spoken language. Oral production is limited to occasional isolated words. Essentially no communicative ability.

Novice — Mid Able to operate only in a very limited capacity within very predictable areas of need....Utterances rarely consist of more than two or three words....

Intermediate — Low Able to satisfy basic survival needs and minimum courtesy requirements. In areas of immediate need or on very familiar topics, can ... maintain very simple face-to-face conversations.

Intermediate — Mid Able to satisfy some survival needs and some limited social demands. Is able to formulate some questions when asked to do so. Vocabulary permits discussion of topics beyond basic survival needs such as personal history and leisure-time activities. Some evidence of grammatical accuracy in basic constructions, for example, subject-verb agreement, noun-adjective agreement, some notion of inflection.

Intermediate — High Able to satisfy most survival needs and limited social demands. ... Limited vocabulary range necessitates much hesitation and circumlocution. The commoner tense forms occur but errors are frequent....While some word order is established, errors still occur in more complex patterns. Ability to describe and give precise information is limited. Aware of basic cohesive features such as pronouns and verb inflections, but many are unreliable. Extended discourse is largely a series of short, discrete utterances....Still has difficulty in producing certain sounds.... Able to produce some narration in either past or future.

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Advanced Able to satisfy routine social demands and limited work requirements. Can handle with confidence but not with facility most social situations.... Can handle limited work requirements, needing help in handling any complication or difficulties. Has a speaking vocabulary sufficient to respond simply with some circumlocutions; accent, though often quite faulty, is intelligible....

Advanced — Plus Able to satisfy most work requirements and show some ability to communicate on concrete topics relating to particular interests and special fields of competence. Generally strong in either grammar or vocabulary, but not in both....Areas of weakness range from simple constructions such as plurals, articles, prepositions, and negatives to more complex structures such as tense usage, passive constructions, word order, and relative clauses.

Superior Able to speak the language with sufficient structural accuracy and vocabulary to participate effectively in most formal and informal conversations on practical, social, and professional topics.

Writing

Novice — Low No functional ability in writing the foreign language.

Novice — Mid No practical communicative writing skills. Able to copy isolated words or short phrases. Able to transcribe previously studied words or phrases.

Novice — High Able to write simple fixed expressions and limited memorized materials. Can write numbers, dates, one's own nationality, and other simple biographic information. ...Can write simple memorized material with frequent misspellings and inaccuracies.

Intermediate — Low [Can] meet limited practical needs. Can write short messages, such as simple questions or notes, postcards, phone messages....Material produced consists of recombinations of learned vocabulary and structures into simple sentences. ...Makes continual errors in spelling, grammar, and punctuation, but writing can be read and understood by a native speaker used to dealing with foreigners....

Intermediate — Mid [Can] meet some survival needs and some limited social demands....Can discuss likes and dislikes, daily routine, everyday events, and the like....Can express past time...with sporadically accurate verbs. Evidence of good control of basic constructions and inflections such as subject-verb agreement, noun-adjective agreement, and straightforward syntactic constructions in present or future time, though errors occasionally occur....When resorting to a dictionary, often is unable to identify appropriate vocabulary, or uses dictionary entry in uninflected form.

Intermediate — High [Can] meet most survival needs and limited social demands. Can take notes in some detail on familiar topics....Can write simple letters, brief synopses and paraphrases, summaries of biographical data and work experience;. Can produce some past verb forms....Shows good control of elementary vocabulary,... but major errors still occur when expressing more complex thoughts. ...Generally cannot use basic cohesive elements of discourse to advantage such as relative constructions, subject pronouns, connectors, etc.

Advanced Able to write routine correspondence and simple discourse of at least several paragraphs on familiar topics....Still makes common errors in spelling and punctuation.... Uses a limited number of cohesive devices such as pronouns and repeated words with good accuracy. Able to join sentences in limited discourse, but has difficulty and makes frequent errors in producing complex sentences....

Advanced — Plus Shows ability to write about most common topics with some precision and in some detail....Can describe and narrate personal experiences and explain simply points of view....Can write about concrete topics relating to particular interests and special fields of competence....Often shows remarkable fluency..., but under time constraints and pressure, language may be inaccurate and/or incomprehensible.

Superior Able to use the written language effectively in most formal and informal exchanges on practical, social, and professional topics. Can write most types of correspondence, such as memos and social and business letters, short research papers, and statements of position in areas of special interest or in special fields. Can express hypotheses, conjectures, and [can] present argument or point of view accurately and effectively....Style may be foreign....Errors, though sometimes made when using more complex structures, are occasional, and rarely disturb the native speaker....Still cannot tailor writing precisely and accurately to a variety of audiences or styles.

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