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ABSTRACT

By analyzing the language proficiency interview style developed by the American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages (ACTFL) in a different way, proficiency profiles can be created that will be of greater use to business language programs and prospective employers than are the ACTFL rankings alone. From the interview, this profile can predict communicative competence in actual situations and diagnose areas where the training of this learner should concentrate. This diagnosis can define skills in business terms and specify training needs for task-oriented training. A generic description for each level of proficiency in the guidelines for listening, speaking, reading, and writing is appended. (MSE)

# A LANGUAGE PROFICIENCY TESTING MODEL FOR BUSINESS NEEDS

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Proficiency testing based on an oral interview is rapidly becoming an integral part of language programs in this country. This is a very positive step which has already had a significant impact on the quality and effectiveness of language teaching in American colleges and universities. The significance of this type of testing for business language programs has been discussed by a number of authors who suggest that the rankings provided by the oral proficiency interview could be used:

1. For placement in business language programs.
2. For rating of candidate performance.
3. For program exit exams.
4. For screening applicants for internships.[1]
5. For determination if applicants meet admission requirements.[2]
6. For course evaluation.[3]

Certainly such rankings could also be used by employers:

1. To determine if applicants meet minimal job standards.
2. For selection for training
3. For placement.
4. For selection for overseas postings.

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[1] The above are suggested by Stanford Dugan in "The ACTFL/ETS Oral Proficiency Interview: A Speaking Test for Multilevel Language Programs," in Proceedings EMU Conference on Foreign Languages for Business, (Eastern Michigan University, April 5-7, 1984), p. 116, 123. ED 254057

[2] This is suggested by John J. Staczek, "A Case for the Foreign Language in the Master's in Business Administration and Master's in International Business," Proceedings of the 1983 Eastern Michigan University Conference on Foreign Languages for Business, (April 7-9) 1983), p. 107. ED 239493

[3] This use is suggested by Henry Garrity, "Adapting the ACTFL/ETS Oral Proficiency Interview to a Business French Course Through Television," Proceedings of the 1984 Eastern Michigan University Conference on Foreign Languages for Business, (Eastern Michigan University, April 5-7, 1984), p. 1025-1035. ED 254057

Wing and Mayewski also suggest that the rankings which result from oral proficiency evaluation could become part of student transcripts and/or resumes.[4]

We contend that by analyzing ACTFL style interviews[5] in a different way profiles can be provided and that these profiles will be of greater use to both business language programs and prospective employers than are the ACTFL rankings alone.[6] Using the type of analysis which we have devised one is able to compile from the interview a profile of a language learner adequate not only to predict communicative competence in actual situations, but also to diagnose areas where the training of this learner should concentrate. Such diagnoses have two further advantages:

1. The diagnoses define skills in ways which make sense in business terms.

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[4] Barbara H. Wing and Sandi F. Mayewski, Oral Proficiency Testing in College-Level Foreign Language Programs. (Hastings-on-Hudson, New York: ACTFL Materials Center, 1984), p.13.

[5] A description is found in:

Barbara H. Wing and Sandi F. Mayewski, Oral Proficiency Testing in College-Level Foreign Language Programs. (Hastings-on-Hudson, New York: ACTFL Materials Center, 1984).

[6] The model under discussion was developed by the authors. Preliminary versions of the model are discussed in:

1. Patrick R. Bennett and Ann Biersteker, "On Categorizing Courses: Reconciling Language Characteristics and Performance Expectations", paper presented at the Conference on Guidelines for the Preparation of Teaching Materials for the African Languages; East Lansing, Michigan, April, 1984. Forthcoming in the conference proceedings.

2. Patrick R. Bennett and Ann Biersteker, "Alternative Performance Guidelines for Swahili," paper presented at the Swahili Workshop, Yale University, March, 1985.

2. The diagnoses specify training needs concretely such that task oriented training can be matched to clearly defined learner needs.

An understanding of the model of communication which is the basis for the resulting profiles illuminates specifically why these profiles are useful for business language purposes. Our method of analysis of the proficiency interview looks at the interview from a different perspective than does the ACTFL model or the model used by the CIA. In the ACTFL model the skills considered are speaking, listening, reading and writing. The CIA model distinguishes six areas: Pronunciation, Fluency/Integrative, Sociolinguistic/Culture, Grammar, Vocabulary, and Tasks. The simple and traditional categories of the ACTFL model have an obvious appeal for explaining concepts of proficiency to a broad audience, but a more detailed type of analysis such as the functional breakdown of the CIA model or that provided by our model is more useful. For a discussion of the advantages of such a breakdown, see Higgs and Clifford.[7]

In looking at the revised (1985/86) ACTFL guidelines from a business language perspective the first and most obvious problem is with the selection of 'skills' for which generic and language specific guidelines are being written. The first aspect of the problem with the skills selected for description is that cultural skills are omitted from the 1985/86 revised guidelines. Even the earlier ACTFL cultural descriptors were weak and required major revision. Cultural skills presumably are essential to most communication in most languages.[8] Numerous authors have discussed the sig-

[7] Theodore V. Higgs and Ray Clifford, "The Push Toward Communication," in Curriculum Competence, and the Foreign Language Teacher, ed. Theodore V. Higgs, (Skokie: National Textbook in conjunction with ACTFL, 1982), p. 57-79.

nificance of cultural skills to business communication.[9]

For our profiling model we have sub-divided the cultural area and consider three cultural skill areas. These are:

1. Socio/Cultural
2. Lexical/Traditional
3. Emotive/Pragmatic

In the socio-cultural area we consider what we term communicative 'scenes'. The term 'scene' here refers to a culture-specific unit of interaction involving patterned, often formalized, activity and associated verbal behavior. Typical 'scenes' include greeting exchanges, different types of introductions, common transactions of various types, and participation in formalized cultural activities ranging from playing games to behaving appropriately at professional and social functions.

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[8] This point as a criticism of the ACTFL guidelines is also made by Savignon who states:

> For anyone who understands communication as the interpretation, expression, and negotiation of meaning within a given context or situation, this identification of four "skills" detached from culture is perplexing, to say the least. Moreover, it runs counter to all the efforts that in recent years have gone into making .... culture ... an integral part of second-language programs."
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> Sandra J. Savignon, "Evaluation of Communicative Competence: The ACTFL Provisional Proficiency Guidelines," The Modern Language Journal, 69, ii (1985), p. 132.

[9] See for example:

1. Philip R. Harris and Robert T. Moran, Managing Cultural Differences, (Houston, Texas: Gulf Publishing, 1979).
2. G. M. Baliga and J. C. Baker. "Multinational Corporate Policies for Expatriate Managers: Selection, Training and Evaluation," Advanced Management Journal, 50. iv (1985), p. 31-38

For example, typical American English, 'scenes' include introductions, license applications, job interviews, "lunching", and card games. The 'scene' should not be confused with the role-play, 'situation' of proficiency testing, which involves the person tested in an artificial imitation of a naturally occurring scene.[10]

The relevance of this skill area to business language performance is made clear by Hijirida and Iwamura who discuss the Japanese scene of exchanging business cards,[11] the difficulties Japanese visitors find with the Social/Cultural "scene" of eating in an American restaurant, [12] and the need for students to role-play and practice:

> communication in settings such as a travel agency or a hotel and in contexts such as conducting an employment interview or helping a client choose a tour.[13]

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3. Mark Mendenhall and Gary Oddou, "The Dimensions of Expatriate Acculturation," Academy of Management Review, 10, i (1985), p. 39-47.

4. John Doohen. "U. S. Business and Foreign Languages: A Survey," Proceedings of the 1983 Eastern Michigan University Conference on Foreign Languages for Business, (April 7-9) 1983), p.46-57. ED 239493

   Doohen points out that 85% of those surveyed responded that knowledge of social customs is of value (p. 50).

5. Mary Hess, "The Perspective of Honeywell" in "A Corporate-Academic Partnership: Honeywell and the College of St. Thomas," by Mary Hess and Paul A. Schons, Proceedings of the 1984 Eastern Michigan University Conference on Foreign Languages for Business and the Professions, (April 5-7) 1984), p. 367- GET END PAGE HERE ED 254057)

   Executives surveyed emphasized the need for cultural skills.

6. Perhaps the most dramatic example of the importance of cultural skills is the case of the American oil company which sent expatriates to an island in the Pacific. These expatriates hired local

Its relevance is also implied by Rodriguez who states that those working in international business need to be aware of "business protocol and procedures."[14] It was also implied by those surveyed by Hess who indicated that they have experienced difficulty in negotiations.[15] Similarly of those surveyed by Contreras and Horwitz, twenty five percent indicated "negotiations" are "situations for which interpreters are needed" and twenty percent indicated "social conversations" are "situations" requiring interpreters.[16]

In the lexical/traditional area we consider range of cultural vocabulary, use of idiom and access to the literary and historical allusions of the target language. This area includes the set of facts, beliefs, and stories that "everyone knows" which color our speech and make our jokes unintelligible to outsiders. For example, a person doing business in particular country needs to know not only technical terms and commonly used acronyms

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personnel without awareness of cultural restrictions on giving instructions. This particular society prohibits younger people from instructing older people, but the foremen hired were younger than the workmen they supervised. The result of this "misunderstanding" was that all the foremen were found with their throats cut. (Source: "Mad dogs and Expatriates," The Economist, March 3, 1984; p. 69.

[10] See, for example, Wing who describes the use of role-play situations in proficiency testing. (Barbara Wing, "Oral Proficiency in Russian". ED 242 193)

[11] Kyoko Hijirida and Susan Grohs Iwamura, "Languages for Travel Industry Managers: Focus on Japanese," Foreign Language Annals, 19, i (1986), p. 21-22.

[12] Kyoko Hijirida and Susan Grohs Iwamura, "Languages for Travel Industry Managers: Focus on Japanese," Foreign Language Annals, 19, i (1986), p. 20-21.

[13] Kyoko Hijirida and Susan Grohs Iwamura, "Languages for Travel Industry Managers: Focus on Japanese," Foreign Language Annals, 19, i (1986), p. 23.

in his/her field, but also the names and stories associated with leaders in the relevant field and legends of business success and failure. Whatever one's field it is also often important to recognize and use symbols of status.

Numerous authors have discussed the importance of background information on politics and economics and business orientation for personnel overseas.[17] The ability to recognize major figures, institutions, and policies is essential. Certainly also critical is the ability to recognize jokes, metaphors, similes, and folklore based on allusions to this type of information.

In our third cultural area, the emotive/pragmatic, we consider control of the force of communication, following Searle and Tannen, et al.[18] The function of language is not only to communicate facts and abstract concepts.

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See also: Clyde Haberman, "Aid to Innocents Abroad," New York Times, Business Section, 30 March, 1986; p. 16. (Review of Diana Rowland, Japanese Business Etiquette: A Practical Guide to Success with the Japanese).

[14] L. Venecia Rodriguez, "Increasing International Business Opportunities through Improved Cross-Cultural Training," Proceedings of the 1983 Eastern Michigan University Conference on Foreign Languages for Business, (April 7-9) 1983), p. 31. ED 239493

[15] Mary Hess, "The Perspective of Honeywell" in "A Corporate-Academic Partnership: Honeywell and the College of St. Thomas," by Mary Hess and Paul A. Schons, Proceedings of the 1984 Eastern Michigan University Conference on Foreign Languages for Business and the Professions, (April 5-7) 1984), p. 367- GET END PAGE HERE ED 254057)

[16] Gloria Contreras and Elaine Horwitz, "A survey of the Foreign Language Use of Selected Texas Business: Implications for Business and Education," Proceedings of the 1983 Eastern Michigan University Conference on Foreign Languages for Business, (April 7-9) 1983), p. 65. ED 239493

[17] For example, see:

M. A. Conway, "Reducing Expatriate Failure Rates", Personnel Administra-

It also serves to express or hide feelings, to command, request, and parsuade, to lie and to set moods. A speaker of a language must recognize and respond to anger, irony, pleading, sympathy, approbation and be able to criticize, offer praise, and indicate varying degrees of sincerity and commitment; courtesy and disdain; and show deference and establish status. Emotive/Pragmatic proficiency is measured by the extent to which one sends, receives and shares signals about the purpose of the communication.

Troyanovich indicates the relevance of this area to business communication when he discusses the importance of understanding "what constitutes a commitment and what form and intensity that commitment really assumes."[19] Its relevance is also implicit in the comments of some of those surveyed by Inman who cited as problems, "'different approaches to solving problems, getting cooperation, and achieving agreement'".[20]

The importance of Emotive/Pragmatic skills to business communication is also emphasized by Copeland who discusses cultural differences regarding openness and directness, the use of written and non-written agreements, the

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tor, 29, (July, 1984), p. 37.

Harris and Moran provide a useful checklist, p. 365-369.

[18] John Searle, Speech Acts: An Essay in the Philosophy of Language. (London: Cambridge University Press, 1969).

Deborah Tannen, That's Not What I Meant! (New York: William Morrow, 1986).

[19] Jack Troyanovich, "Foreign Language Skills are Survival Skills in Today's Business," Proceedings of the 1983 Eastern Michigan University Conference on Foreign Languages for Business, (April 7-9) 1983), p. 9-10. ED 239493

[20] Marianne Inman, "Language and Cross-Cultural Training in American Multinational Corporations," The Modern Language Journal, 69, iii (1985), p. 250.

use of silence, and the provision and non-provision of detail.[21]

In the earlier ACTFL model and in many training models amorphous "cultural skills" are presented as distinct from language skills. In our model cultural behavior is integrally linked to specific aspects of language behavior. The need for models of this type in designing the curricula of business language programs is suggested by Hijirida and Iwamura who say:

> Traditionally, curricula have reflected culture, business, and the foreign language itself as separate domains. It has become apparent that this is not a very functional approach - particularly for Travel Industry Management majors. Rather, elements of culture must be integrated into the Japanese language curriculum and instructional materials must be developed which will help students develop communication in the environment of business, specifically the travel industry.[22]

The other skill areas distinguished by out model are the aural/oral, and reading/writing. In the oral/aural area we examine fluency and control in operating the phonology, morphology, syntax and semantics of the language.

A second problem with the ACTFL set of skills is that although a conversational interview is the basis for the evaluation, the rating is of speaking and listening skills. In our profiling model we add an additional skill area - interaction.

A learner who can produce quite reasonable utterances and who can follow speech reasonably may still be inadequate in an interactive situation where quick and appropriate reactions are essential. This point is also made by

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[21] Lennie Copeland, "Making Costs Count in International Travel: Cross-Cultural Awareness Makes the Difference," Personnel Administrator, 29 (July, 1984), p. 50.

[22] Kyoko Hijirida and Susan Grohs Iwamura, "Languages for Travel Industry Managers: Focus on Japanese," Foreign Language Annals, 19, i (1986), p. 20.

Porter (1983) who adds that, "[a]nother aspect of the interactive nature of natural language use is that the language produced is modified by the producer in accordance with what he or she perceives the expectations of the addressee to be".[23] Appropriate turn-taking and interrupting behavior, topic switching and linking strategies, eye contact, and appropriate adjustment of rate of speech, volume and pacing[24] are all essential to effective interactive communication but are not required for either input or output.

In addition to considering interaction, we also, of course, consider production and reception. Our model recognizes that "speaking" and "listening" involve the intersection of two types of skills: control in operating oral/aural aspects of language and production and reception skills. We thus define five communication media and four modes. [See: Figure 1 - Communication Media] The modes are:

1. Output

   Composition, or encoding of language and other behavior. In aural/oral terms we refer to speech production; in the reading/writing medium, to writing; in the lexical/traditional area to reference to tradition; in the emotive/pragmatic to ability to encode metamessages[25] in the social/ cultural to ability to behave appropriately in

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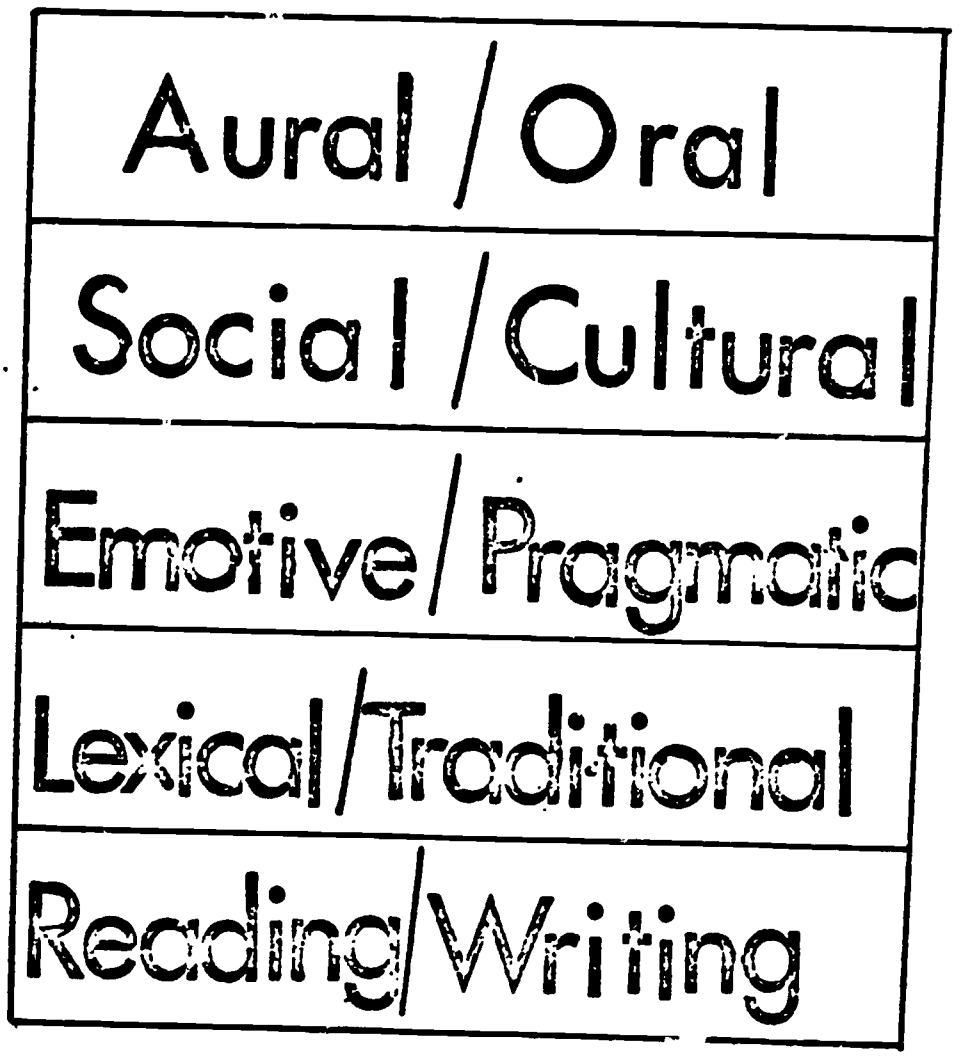
[23] Don Porter, "Assessing Communicative Proficiency: the Search for Validity," in Keith Johnson and Don Porter (eds.) Perspectives in Communicative Language Teaching. London: Academic, 1983, p. 192.

[24] These are discussed by Deborah Tannen in That's Not What I Meant! (New York: William Morrow, 1986).

[25] Tannen defines "metamessages by saying that while "messages" convey information, "metamessages" communicate, "attitudes toward each other, the occasion, and what we are saying."

Deborah Tannen, That's Not What I Meant! (New York: William Morrow, 1986), p. 29.


Aural / Oral
Social / Cultural
Emotive / Pragmatic
Lexical / Traditional
Reading / Writing

various "scenes".

2. Input

Reception, perception, decoding or understanding. In the aural/oral medium, we refer to listening, in the reading/writing medium to reading; in the emotive/pragmatic, to decoding "metamessages"; in the lexical/ traditional, to comprehension of reference to tradition; in the social/cultural, to understanding behavior in scenes of various types.

It will not surprise any language learner or teacher that we have recognized in our model that the input and output modes require very different strategies, and that in a profile levels in the two modes differ considerably.

3. Interactive

This is the mode of conversation, or participation in the culture. At first it may seem redundant to recognize this mode which is so heavily dependent on the mix of receptive and productive skills. Yet the interactive mode involves a set of strategies all its own.

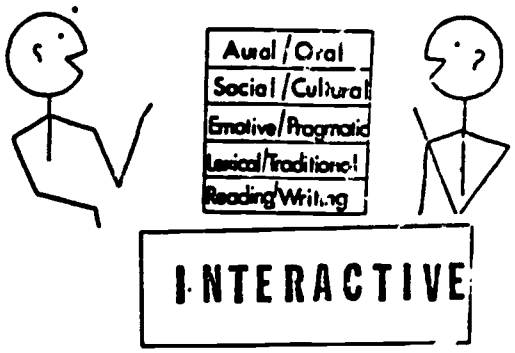
4. Abstract

Conscious awareness of the rules and structure of communicative behavior, the ability to cite meanings, contexts, and to explain usages. The abstract mode differs from the other modes in that it does not involve actual communication. We include it because awareness of language, whether formal or informal, descriptive or prescriptive, correct or incorrect, is involved in guiding a person's communica-

tive behavior, and is especially important for the linguist or language teacher. [See: Figure 2 - Communication Modes]

In addition to defining five communication media (aural/oral, lexical/traditional, emotive/pragmatic,and reading/writing) and four communication skill modes (input, output, interaction and abstract[26] ), our model looks at three levels of units. [See: Figure 3 - Unit Levels]. These are word, sentence, and discourse in the aural/oral, reading and writing media. In the lexical/traditional medium the first unit level is that of non-literal terms and technical terms, symbols, nicknames and caricatures. The second unit level is that of idioms, proverbs, puns, fixed metaphors and similes. The third unit level is that of allusions to traditions and history. The three levels in the social/cultural medium are survival scenes, maintenance scenes, and professional scenes. Survival scenes include greeting formalities, polite expressions, asking for meanings of words etc. Maintenance level scenes are those such as obtaining food and shelter, asking directions, obtaining assistance etc. Professional level scenes are those which involve participation in the culture, involvement in ceremonies etc. In the emotive/pragmatic medium the first unit level consists of explicit performative formulae (such as "thanks" or "right on!"); and explicit markings of illocutionary acts ("certainly", "really?", "o.k.") At the next level are indirect acts (as in 'could you come here?', a request for motion rather than information) and utterances which involve sarcasm or irony. The upper level is that of rhetoric or argument, where categories such as narrative, description, exhortation and explanation are to be mastered. Mark-

[26] The abstract mode is not discussed in full here because it is useful primarily to linguists and language teachers, and is not very important for evaluating functional proficiency. It is in any case very adequately tested using conventional discrete-point formats.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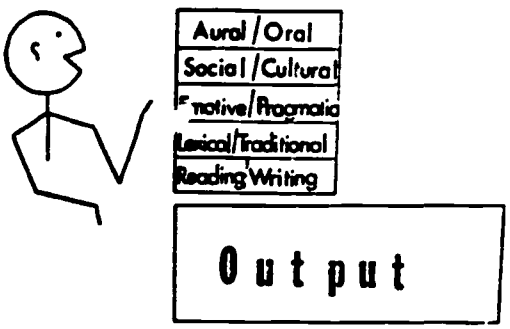
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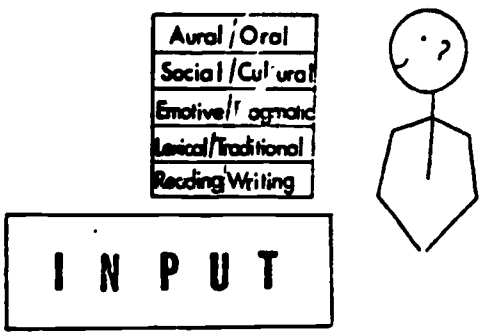
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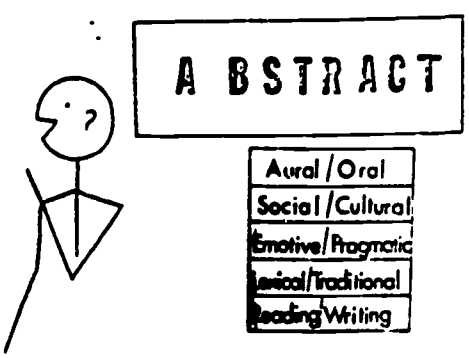
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Lexical/Traditional
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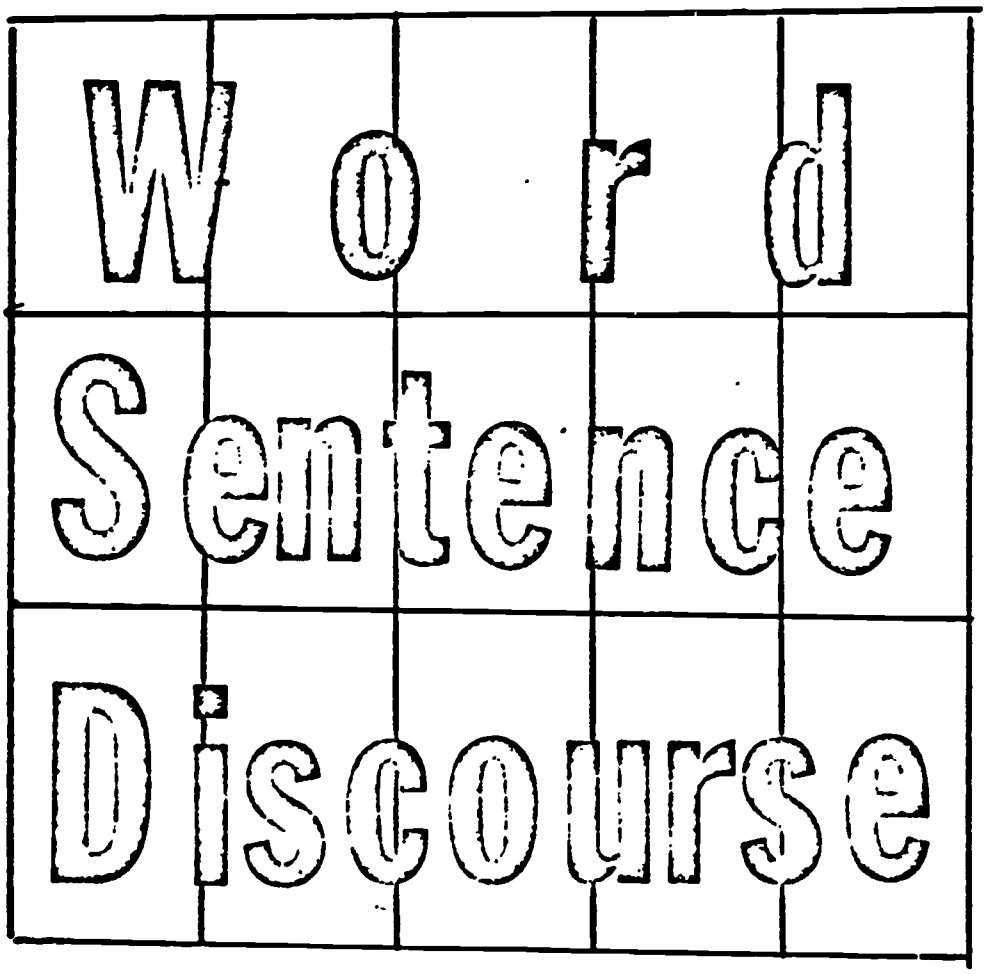
Word
Sentence
Discourse

ers at this level involve complex patterns of clause structure, lexical choice, intonation, register, voice quality, and the like.

In evaluating the interview, rankings from 0 - 3 are provided. Each profile thus provides a 0-3 rating in each of 60 categories. Evaluators, of course, do not rank in 60 categories. Rather profiles are generated through use of a programmed profiling guide. The evaluator answers a series of questions.

Rather than defining skills vaguely as "listening", "speaking", "reading", "writing", and "cultural" the profiles generated by our model define skills in concrete terms which make sense in a business environment. These specific definitions could be used in defining minimum skill requirements, specifying objectives for training programs, and used in surveys to determine which skills are given priority by firms surveyed.[27]

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[27] Inman's use of vague ACTFL style descriptions of skills may be one reason why she has gotten little useful information on skill requirements. (Marianne Inman, "Language and Cross-Cultural Training in American Multinational Corporations," The Modern Language Journal, 69, iii (1985) p. 247 - 255). An earlier version of this article is found in: Proceedings of the 1984 Eastern Michigan University Conference on Foreign Languages for Business, (Eastern Michigan University, April 5-7, 1984). ED 254057

See also Marianne Inman, "Foreign Languages and the US Multinational Corporation," Modern Language Journal, 64 (1980), p. 64-74.

This same problem may also be reflected in the data produced by Ranwez and Schmidt's survey where the skills which firms were asked to rank are: "conversation", "translation", "technical", "composition", "cultural-intercultural", and "interpretation", p 41. (Alain D. Ranwez and Donald Schmidt, "Foreign Languages and International Businesses in Colorado: A Report and Assessment", Proceedings of the 1984 Eastern Michigan University Conference on Foreign Languages for Business and the Professions, (April 5-7) 1984), p. 41. ED 254057)

The problem of defining skills vaguely as "listening" and "speaking" may also have affected the results of Uber's study, p. 61, 62. (David Uber, "The Use of Foreign Languages in International Banking: A Survey of 30

Training needs are concretely defined by the profiles generated by this model.[28] When matched with the specific requirements of a person's assignment it is easy to design task oriented training in which language and cultural training are integrated. For example, family members without level 1 social/cultural skills would clearly benefit more from role-play practice of scenes such as using a phrase book to buy food and telling a taxi driver where they want to go then from lectures on "basic facts of geography etc." or discussions of simplistic models of cultural values.[29]

Similarly those who will have supervisory responsibilities who lack high level emotive-pragmatic skill will benefit more from small group activities with target language speakers focussed on comparing ways of praising, thanking, criticizing, and congratulating than from considering "components of societal order."[30]

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Major Banks in Houston and Dallas," Proceedings of the 1984 Eastern Michigan University Conference on Foreign Languages for Business and the Professions, (April 5-7) 1984), p. 42- 64. ED 254057)

[28] The need for such clear definitions of training requirements has been discussed by a number of authors. For example, Inman argues that a company needs,"to analyze very clearly what its needs are and the competencies it wishes its employees to demonstrate" (Marianne Inman, "Language and Cross-Cultural Training in American Multinational Corporations," The Modern Language Journal, 69, iii (1985) p.253).

Similarly Hijirida and Iwamura state: "there is a necessity for a curriculum of foreign language courses that meets the specific needs of the international business student" (Kyoko Hijirida and Susan Grohs Iwamura, "Languages for Travel Industry Managers: Focus on Japanese," Foreign Language Annals, 19, i (1986), p. 23).

[29] These are the sorts of activities suggested for cultural training by Susan Rippert-Davila in "Cross-Cultural Training for Business: A Consultant's Primer," The Modern Language Journal, 69, iii (1985) p. 241.

[30] Another activity suggested by Rippert-Davila, p. 242.

The strength of our model is that it incorporates the strongest features of the ACTFL model, the oral interview, while replacing the weakest feature of the ACTFL model, its skill descriptors. The ACTFL model has a great deal of potential for business language instruction and employment placement and evaluation especially if it is combined with a method of profiling. It has this potential because the ACTFL interview is based on an interviewing technique which has been extremely well tested. For over 30 years the interviewing technique has been used and refined in government agencies including the FSI, Defense Language Institute, CIA, and Peace Corps. In recent years thousands of language teachers have been trained by ACTFL.

The interview has been found to be a powerful indicator of functional communication skills and its reliablity has been tested and validated. The ratings have found to be reliable predictors of field functioning.

The second reason why the ACTFL model has potential is that it is being applied to a wide range of languages and currently has a great deal of support. ACTFL and the Center for Applied Linguistics in conjunction with professional organizations and with the support of the U. S. Department of Education, the Interagency Language Roundtable, the National Security Agency, the National Endowment for the Humanities are bringing together large numbers of language educators in workshops and training sessions.[31] The purpose of these meetings is, of course, to promote the model and involve others in application, development and refinement of the model; but what is also happening is that teachers of a wide range of languages are being provided with opportunities to meet and discuss common problems and

[31] Barbara H. Wing and Sandi F. Hayewski, Oral Proficiency Testing in College-Level Foreign Language Programs. (Hastings-on-Hudson, New York: ACTFL Materials Center, 1984).

search for solutions to these problems. A second benefit of these meetings is that they are focused on functional communication skills and a great deal of attention is being paid to issues in language pedagogy which had previously received little attention. Issues such as how can we best teach various communication skills, what priority should be given to which skills, in what order should we teach skills etc. are being given long overdue attention.

The ACTFL oral interview and the rankings generated from the interview have a great deal of potential value. Yet even for ranking purposes the ACTFL skill descriptors require revision. In the revised ACTFL skill descriptors, especially at the higher levels, there is great emphasis on being able to discuss "abstract topics", "hypothesize", "support opinions", to comprehend "symposia", "academic debates", "public policy statements".[32] This is an improvement over the old descriptors where a significant skill was being able "to interpret for dignitaries".[33] The old descriptors emphasized skills needed for diplomatic service. The new descriptors emphasize skills needed by academics who attend international conferences. Alternative descriptors are clearly required for business purposes.

For business and professional considerations our model has more useful descriptors and the additional advantage of focussing on specific types of content (Social/Cultural, Emotive/Pragmatic and Lexical/Traditional). Ratings normally indicate a general level of competence with no indication of specialization. Our profiles delineate specific areas of strength and

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[32] American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages, Provisional Proficiency Guidelines, (Hastings-on-Hudson, New York: ACTFL, 1982).

[33] ACTFL, Proficiency Guidelines, 1986.

weakness.

For teachers and business personnel involved in international communication, it will be important to have both a rating, as a generalized index of communicative potential, and a profile, as presenting a pattern of strength and weaknesses.

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# ACTFL PROFICIENCY GUIDELINES

The 1986 proficiency guidelines represent a hierarchy of global characterizations of integrated performance in speaking, listening, reading and writing. Each description is a representative, not an exhaustive, sample of a particular range of ability, and each level subsumes all previous levels, moving from simple to complex in an "all-before-and-more" fashion.

Because these guidelines identify stages of proficiency, as opposed to achievement, they are not intended to measure what an individual has achieved through specific classroom instruction but rather to allow assessment of what an individual can and cannot do, regardless of where, when, or how the language has been learned or acquired; thus, the words "learned" and "acquired" are used in the broadest sense. These guidelines are not based on a particular linguistic theory or pedagogical method, since the guidelines are proficiency-based, as opposed to achievement-based, and are intended to be used for global assessment.

The 1986 guidelines should not be considered the definitive version, since the construction and utilization of language proficiency guidelines is a dynamic, interactive process. The academic sector, like the government sector, will continue to refine and update the criteria periodically to reflect the needs of the users and the advances of the profession. In this vein, ACTFL owes a continuing debt to the creators of the 1982 provisional proficiency guidelines and, of course, to the members of the Interagency Language Roundtable Testing Committee, the creators of the government's Language Skill Level Descriptions.

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## Generic Descriptions–Speaking

**Novice**

The Novice level is characterized by the ability to communicate minimally with learned material

Novice-Low

Oral production consists of isolated words and perhaps a few high-frequency phrases. Essentially no functional communicative ability.

Novice-Mid

Oral production continues to consist of isolated words and learned phrases within very predictable areas of need, although quantity is increased. Vocabulary is sufficient only for handling simple, elementary needs and expressing basic courtesies. Utterances rarely consist of more than two or three words and show frequent long pauses and repetition of interlocutor's words. Speaker may have some difficulty producing even the simplest utterances. Some Novice-Mid speakers will be understood only with great difficulty.

Novice-High

Able to satisfy partially the requirements of basic communicative exchanges by relying heavily on learned utterances but occasionally expanding these through simple recombinations of their elements. Can ask questions or make statements involving learned material. Shows signs of spontaneity although this falls short of real autonomy of expression. Speech continues to consist of learned utterances rather than of personalized, situationally adapted ones. Vocabulary centers on areas such as basic objects, places, and most common kinship terms. Pronunciation may still be strongly influenced by first language. Errors are frequent and, in spite of repetition, some Novice-High speakers will have difficulty being understood even by sympathetic interlocutors.

**Intermediate**

The Intermediate level is characterized by the speaker's ability to:
—create with the language by combining and recombining learned elements, though primarily in a reactive mode;
—initiate, minimally sustain, and close in a simple way basic communicative tasks; and
—ask and answer questions.

Intermediate-Low

Able to handle successfully a limited number of interactive, task-oriented and social situations. Can ask and answer questions, initiate and respond to simple statements and maintain face-to-face conversation, although in a highly restricted manner and with much linguistic inaccuracy. Within these limitations, can perform such tasks as introducing self, ordering a meal, asking directions, and making purchases. Vocabulary is adequate to express only the most elementary needs. Strong interference from native language may occur. Misunderstandings frequently arise, but with repetition, the Intermediate-Low speaker can generally be understood by sympathetic interlocutors.

Intermediate-Mid

Able to handle successfully a variety of uncomplicated, basic and communicative tasks and social situations. Can talk simply about self and family members. Can ask and answer questions and participate in simple conversations on topics beyond the most immediate needs; e.g., personal history and leisure time activities. Utterance length increases slightly, but speech may continue to be characterized by frequent long pauses, since the smooth incorporation of even basic conversational strategies is often hindered as the speaker struggles to create appropriate language forms. Pronunciation may continue to be strongly influenced by first language and fluency may still be strained. Although misunderstandings still arise, the Intermediate-Mid speaker can generally be understood by sympathetic interlocutors.

Intermediate-High

Able to handle successfully most uncomplicated communicative tasks and social situations. Can initiate, sustain, and close a general conversation with a number of strategies appropriate to a range of circumstances and topics, but errors are evident. Limited vocabulary still necessitates hesitation and may bring about slightly unexpected circumlocution. There is emerging evidence of connected discourse, particularly for simple narration and/or description. The Intermediate-High speaker can generally by understood even by interlocutors not accustomed to dealing with speakers at this level, but repetition may still be required.

**Advanced**

The Advanced level is characterized by the speaker's ability to:
—converse in a clearly participatory fashion;
—initiate, sustain, and bring to closure a wide variety of communicative tasks, including those that require an increased ability to convey meaning with diverse language strategies due to a complication or an unforeseen turn of events;
—satisfy the requirements of school and work situations; and
—narrate and describe with paragraph-length connected discourse.

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| Advanced | Able to satisfy the requiren nts of everyday situations and routine school and work requirements. Can handle with confidence but not with facility complicated tasks and social situations, such as elaborating, complaining, and apologizing. Can narrate and describe with some details, linking sentences together smoothly. Can communicate facts and talk casually about topics of current public and personal interest, using general vocabulary. Shortcomings can often be smoothed over by communicative strategies, such as pause fillers, stalling devices, and different rates of speech. Circumlocution which arises from vocabulary or syntactic limitations very often is quite successful, though some groping for words may still be evident. The Advanced-level speaker can be understood without difficulty by native interlocutors. |
| Advanced-Plus | Able to satisfy the requirements of a broad variety of everyday, school, and work situations. Can discuss concrete topics relating to particular interests and special fields of competence. There is emerging evidence of ability to support opinions, explain in detail, and hypothesize. The Advanced-Plus speaker often shows a well developed ability to compensate for an imperfect grasp of some forms with confident use of communicative strategies, such as paraphrasing and circumlocution. Differentiated vocabulary and intonation are effectively used to communicate fine shades of meaning. The Advanced-Plus speaker often shows remarkable fluency and ease of speech but under the demands of Superior-level, complex tasks, language may break down or prove inadequate. |
| **Superior** | The Superior level is characterized by the speaker's ability to.<br>—participate effectively in most formal and informal conversations on practical, social, professional, and abstract topics; and<br>—support opinions and hypothesize using native-like discourse strategies. |
| Superior | Able to speak the language with sufficient accuracy to participate effectively in most formal and informal conversations on practical, social, professional, and abstract topics. Can discuss special fields of competence and interest with ease. Can support opinions and hypothesize, but may not be able to tailor language to audience or discuss in depth highly abstract or unfamiliar topics. Usually the Superior level speaker is only partially familiar with regional or other dialectical variants. The Superior level speaker commands a wide variety of interactive strategies and shows good awareness of discourse strategies. The latter involves the ability to distinguish main ideas from supporting information through syntactic, lexical and suprasegmental features (pitch, stress, intonation). Sporadic errors may occur, particularly in low-frequency structures and some complex high-frequency structures more common to formal writing, but no patterns of error are evident. Errors do not disturb the native speaker or interfere with communication. |

## Generic Descriptions–Listening

These guidelines assume that all listening tasks take place in an authentic environment at a normal rate of speech using standard or near-standard norms.

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| Novice-Low | Understanding is limited to occasional isolated words, such as cognates, borrowed words, and high-frequency social conventions. Essentially no ability to comprehend even short utterances. |
| Novice-Mid | Able to understand some short, learned utterances, particularly where context strongly supports understanding and speech is clearly audible. Comprehends some words and phrases from simple questions, statements, high-frequency commands and courtesy formulae about topics that refer to basic personal information or the immediate physical setting. The listener requires long pauses for assimilation and periodically requests repetition and/or a slower rate of speech. |
| Novice-High | Able to understand short, learned utterances and some sentence-length utterances, particularly where context strongly supports understanding and speech is clearly audible. Comprehends words and phrases from simple questions, statements, high-frequency commands and courtesy formulae. May require repetition, rephrasing and/or a slowed rate of speech for comprehension. |
| Intermediate-Low | Able to understand sentence-length utterances which consist of recombinations of learned elements in a limited number of content areas, particularly if strongly supported by the situational context. Content refers to basic personal background and needs, social conventions and routine tasks, such as getting meals and receiving simple instructions and directions. Listening tasks pertain primarily to spontaneous face-to-face conversations. Understanding is often uneven; repetition and rewording may be necessary. Misunderstandings in both main ideas and details arise frequently. |

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| Intermediate-Mid | Able to understand sentence-length utterances which consist of recombinations of learned utterances on a variety of topics. Content continues to refer primarily to basic personal background and needs, social conventions and somewhat more complex tasks, such as lodging, transportation, and shopping. Additional content areas include some personal interests and activities, and a greater diversity of instructions and directions. Listening tasks not only pertain to spontaneous face-to-face conversations but also to short routine telephone conversations and some deliberate speech, such as simple announcements and reports over the media. Understanding continues to be uneven. |
| Intermediate-High | Able to sustain understanding over longer stretches of connected discourse on a number of topics pertaining to different times and places; however, understanding is inconsistent due to failure to grasp main ideas and/or details. Thus, while topics do not differ significantly from those of an Advanced level listener, comprehension is less in quantity and poorer in quality. |
| Advanced | Able to understand main ideas and most details of connected discourse on a variety of topics beyond the immediacy of the situation. Comprehension may be uneven due to a variety of linguistic and extralinguistic factors, among which topic familiarity is very prominent. These texts frequently involve description and narration in different time frames or aspects, such as present, nonpast, habitual, or imperfective. Texts may include interviews, short lectures on familiar topics, and news items and reports primarily dealing with factual information. Listener is aware of cohesive devices but may not be able to use them to follow the sequence of thought in an oral text. |
| Advanced-Plus | Able to understand the main ideas of most speech in a standard dialect; however, the listener may not be able to sustain comprehension in extended discourse which is propositionally and linguistically complex. Listener shows an emerging awareness of culturally implied meanings beyond the surface meanings of the text but may fail to grasp sociocultural nuances of the message. |
| Superior | Able to understand the main ideas of all speech in a standard dialect, including technical discussion in a field of specialization. Can follow the essentials of extended discourse which is propositionally and linguistically complex, as in academic/professional settings, in lectures, speeches, and reports. Listener shows some appreciation of aesthetic norms of target language, of idioms, colloquialisms, and register shifting. Able to make inferences within the cultural framework of the target language. Understanding is aided by an awareness of the underlying organizational structure of the oral text and includes sensitivity for its social and cultural references and its affective overtones. Rarely misunderstands but may not understand excessively rapid, highly colloquial speech or speech that has strong cultural references. |
| Distinguished | Able to understand all forms and styles of speech pertinent to personal, social and professional needs tailored to different audiences. Shows strong sensitivity to social and cultural references and aesthetic norms by processing language from within the cultural framework. Texts include theater plays, screen productions, editorials, symposia, academic debates, public policy statements, literary readings, and most jokes and puns. May have difficulty with some dialects and slang. |

## Generic Descriptions-Reading

These guidelines assume all reading texts to be authentic and legible.

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| Novice-Low | Able occasionally to identify isolated words and/or major phrases when strongly supported by context. |
| Novice-Mid | Able to recognize the symbols of an alphabetic and/or syllabic writing system and/or a limited number of characters in a system that uses characters. The reader can identify an increasing number of highly contextualized words and/or phrases including cognates and borrowed words, where appropriate. Material understood rarely exceeds a single phrase at a time, and rereading may be required. |
| Novice-High | Has sufficient control of the writing system to interpret written language in areas of practical need. Where vocabulary has been learned, can read for instructional and directional purposes standardized messages, phrases or expressions, such as some items on menus, schedules, timetables, maps, and signs. At times, but not on a consistent basis, the Novice-High level reader may be able to derive meaning from material at a slightly higher level where context and/or extralinguistic background knowledge are supportive. |

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| Intermediate-Low | Able to understand main ideas and/or some facts from the simplest connected texts dealing with basic personal and social needs. Such texts are linguistically noncomplex and have a clear underlying internal structure, for example chronological sequencing. They impart basic information about which the reader has to make only minimal suppositions or to which the reader brings personal interest and/or knowledge. Examples include messages with social purposes or information for the widest possible audience, such as public announcements and short, straightforward instructions dealing with public life. Some misunderstandings will occur. |
| Intermediate-Mid | Able to read consistently with increased understanding simple connected texts dealing with a variety of basic and social needs. Such texts are still linguistically noncomplex and have a clear underlying internal structure. They impart basic information about which the reader has to make minimal suppositions and to which the reader brings personal interest and/or knowledge. Examples may include short, straightforward descriptions of persons, places, and things written for a wide audience. |
| Intermediate—High | Able to read consistently with full understanding simple connected texts dealing with basic personal and social needs about which the reader has personal interest and/or knowledge. Can get some main ideas and information from texts at the next higher level featuring description and narration. Structural complexity may interfere with comprehension; for example, basic grammatical relations may be misinterpreted and temporal references may rely primarily on lexical items. Has some difficulty with the cohesive factors in discourse, such as matching pronouns with referents. While texts do not differ significantly from those at the Advanced level, comprehension is less consistent. May have to read material several times for understanding. |
| Advanced | Able to read somewhat longer prose of several paragraphs in length, particularly if presented with a clear underlying structure. The prose is predominantly in familar sentence patterns. Reader gets the main ideas and facts and misses some details. Comprehension derives not only from situational and subject matter knowledge but from increasing control of the language. Texts at this level include descriptions and narrations such as simple short stories, news items, bibliographical information, social notices, personal correspondence, routinized business letters and simple technical material written for the general reader. |
| Advanced-Plus | Able to follow essential points of written discourse at the Superior level in areas of special interest or knowledge. Able to understand parts of texts which are conceptually abstract and linguistically complex, and/or texts which treat unfamiliar topics and situations, as well as some texts which involve aspects of target-language culture. Able to comprehend the facts to make appropriate inferences. An emerging awareness of the aesthetic properties of language and of its literary styles permits comprehension of a wider variety of texts, including literary. Misunderstandings may occur. |
| Superior | Able to read with almost complete comprehension and at normal speed expository prose on unfamiliar subjects and a variety of literary texts. Reading ability is not dependent on subject matter knowledge, although the reader is not expected to comprehend thoroughly texts which are highly dependent on knowledge of the target culture. Reads easily for pleasure. Superior-level texts feature hypotheses, argumentation and supported opinions and include grammatical patterns and vocabulary ordinarily encountered in academic/professional reading. At this level, due to the control of general vocabulary and structure, the reader is almost always able to match the meanings derived from extralinguistic knowledge with meanings derived from knowledge of the language, allowing for smooth and efficient reading of diverse texts. Occasional misunderstandings may still occur, for example, the reader may experience some difficulty with unusually complex structures and low-frequency idioms. At the Superior level the reader can match strategies, top-down or bottom-up, which are most appropriate to the text. (Top-down strategies rely on real-world knowledge and prediction based on genre and organizational scheme of the text. Bottom-up strategies rely on actual linguistic knowledge.) Material at this level will include a variety of literary texts, editorials, correspondence, general reports and technical material in professional fields. Rereading is rarely necessary, and misreading is rare. |
| Distinguished | Able to read fluently and accurately most styles and forms of the language pertinent to academic and professional needs. Able to relate inferences in the text to real-world knowledge and understand almost all sociolinguistic and cultural references by processing language from within the cultural framework. Able to understand a writer's use of nuance and subtlety. Can readily follow unpredictable turns of thought and author intent in such materials as sophisticated editorials, specialized journal articles, and literary texts such as novels, plays, poems, as well as in any subject matter area directed to the general reader. |

## Generic Descriptions–Writing

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| Novice-Low | Able to form some letters in an alphabetic system. In languages whose writing systems use syllabaries or characters, writer is able to both copy and produce the basic strokes. Can produce romanization of isolated characters, where applicable. |

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| Novice-Mid | Able to copy or transcribe familiar words or phrases and reproduce some from memory No practical communicative writing skills. |
| Novice-High | Able to write simple fixed expressions and limited memorized material and some recombinations thereof. Can supply information on simple forms and documents. Can write names, numbers, dates, own nationality, and other simple autobiographical information as well as some short phrases and simple lists. Can write all the symbols in an alpahbetic or syllabic system or 50-100 characters or compounds in a character writing system. Spelling and representation of symbols (letters, syllables, characters) may be partially correct. |
| Intermediate-Low | Able to meet limited practical writing needs Can write short messages, postcards, and take down simple notes, such as telephone messages. Can create statements or questions within the scope of limited language experience. Material produced consists of recombinations of learned vocabulary and structures into simple sentences on very familiar topics. Language is inadequate to express in writing anything but elementary needs. Frequent errors in grammar, vocabulary, punctuation, spelling and in formation of nonalphabetic symbols, but writing can be understood by natives used to the writing of nonnatives |
| Intermediate-Mid | Able to meet a number of practical writing needs Can write short, simple letters. Content involves personal preferences, daily routine, everyday events, and other topics grounded in personal experience. Can express present time or at least one other time frame or aspect consistently, e.g., nonpast, habitual, imperfective. Evidence of control of the syntax of noncomplex sentences and basic inflectional morphology, such as declensions and conjugation Writing tends to be a loose collection of sentences or sentence fragments on a given topic and provides little evidence of conscious organization. Can be understood by natives used to the writing of nonnatives. |
| Intermediate-High | Able to meet most practical writing needs and limited social demands. Can take notes in some detail on familiar topics and respond in writing to personal questions. Can write simple letters, brief synopses and paraphrases, summaries of biographical data, work and school experience In those languages relying primarily on content words and time expressions to express time, tense, or aspect, some precision is displayed; where tense and/or aspect is expressed through verbal inflection, forms are produced rather consistently, but not always accurately An ability to describe and narrate in paragraphs is emerging. Rarely uses basic cohesive elements, such as pronominal substitutions or synonyms in written discourse. Writing, though faulty, is generally comprehensible to natives used to the writing of nonnatives. |
| Advanced | Able to write routine social correspondence and join sentences in simple discourse of at least several paragraphs in length on familiar topics. Can write simple social correspondence, take notes, write cohesive summaries and resumes, as well as narratives and descriptions of a factual nature. Has sufficient writing vocabulary to express self simply with some circumlocution. May still make errors in punctuation, spelling, or the formation of nonalphabetic symbols. Good control of the morphology and the most frequently used syntactic structures, e g , common word order patterns, coordination, subordination, but makes frequent errors in producing complex sentences. Uses a limited number of cohesive devices, such as pronouns, accurately. Writing may resemble literal translations from the native language, but a sense of organization (rhetorical structure) is emerging. Writing is understandable to natives not used to the writing of nonnatives. |
| Advanced-Plus | Able to write about a variety of topics with significant precision and in detail. Can write most social and informal business correspondence. Can describe and narrate personal experiences fully but has difficulty supporting points of view in written discourse. Can write about the concrete aspects of topics relating to particular interests and special fields of competence. Often shows remarkable fluency and ease of expression, but under time constraints and pressure writing may be inaccurate. Generally strong in either grammar or vocabulary, but not in both. Weakness and unevenness in one of the foregoing or in spelling or character writing formation may result in occasional miscommunication. Some misuse of vocabulary may still be evident. Style may still be obviously foreign |
| Superior | Able to express self effectively in most formal and informal writing on practical, social and professional topics. Can write most types of correspondence, such as memos as well as social and business letters, and short research papers and statements of position in areas of special interest or in special fields. Good control of a full range of structures, spelling or nonalphabetic symbol production, and a wide general vocabulary allow the writer to hypothesize and present arguments or points of view accurately and effectively. An underlying organization, such as chronological ordering, logical ordering, cause and effect, comparison, and thematic development is strongly evident, although not thoroughly executed and/or not totally reflecting target language patterns. Although sensitive to differences in formal and informal style, still may not tailor writing precisely to a variety of purposes and/or readers. Errors in writing rarely disturb natives or cause miscommunication. |