

The Benefits of Incorporating Proficiency Descriptors in Community College Foreign Language Instruction

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Across the nation, language programs at two- and four-year institutions of higher learning are grappling with program evaluation to ensure quality instruction and compliance with accrediting standards. The American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages (ACTFL), the nation's leading language assessment body, has put forth five proficiency levels applicable to all languages that systematize and facilitate language teaching, learning, and assessment. Ranging from novice to distinguished, each of these five levels lays out specific proficiency descriptors or can-do statements that convey what learners can communicate in the target language at each proficiency level.

The inclusion of ACTFL standards in college level language courses' syllabi helps to situate each course on the journey towards proficiency, facilitates determinations of equivalency among courses, and fosters quality assurance in the eyes of external evaluators. Community college language instructors whose courses have already been accepted into the Combined Course Library might not see a need to change them by incorporating proficiency standards. However, besides serving the external purposes outlined above, proficiency descriptors can greatly enhance the learning experience for our students. Moreover, while designed to enhance the quality of instruction and learning in foreign language courses, proficiency oriented can-do statements can be adapted across disciplines to improve student success more widely.

Firstly, the inclusion of proficiency descriptors,

or can-do statements, in the list of course learning outcomes and lesson plans would help gear instruction toward the communicative aim of language acquisition from the first day of instruction. Grammar explanations would be kept to a minimum, and time for conversation-based activities would be maximized. Rather than proposing the ability to conjugate verbs as a learning outcome, for instance, a performance descriptor would highlight telling time in the present tense as a beginning level outcome, or the ability to tell a simple story in the past tense at the intermediate level.

Secondly, the presence of performance descriptors would present students with a detailed overall picture of how their communicative abilities are expected to progress. In turn, students would gain more control over the learning process and would engage in honest reflection about their own progress. Communicating the expected level of performance to students early on, alongside detailed descriptors of what their output would look like to meet the learning objective, would also enhance the transparency of the instructional process.

Thirdly, tangible language proficiency benchmarks are often expected in foreign service careers and in study abroad programs, to name just two situations. By allowing teaching and learning to be driven by aspirational proficiency descriptors, instructors would prepare students for the eventual use of language abilities in professional and practical living situations in which functional communication would be key to both success and survival. For instance, individuals who pursue careers abroad with the U.S. Department of State are often required to sit for an Oral Proficiency Interview that certifies what they can and cannot do with the target language. The

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more complex one's duties are, the higher the expected proficiency level of the individual candidate. Since Oral Proficiency Interviews typically measure overall functionality (rather than mastery of discrete language points), candidates with previous exposure to proficiency-based language instruction can only stand to gain from being introduced to proficiency benchmarks in their coursework.

As experienced language teachers know well, students do not necessarily make linear progress in their communicative abilities. Fairly often, a learner may be well equipped to perform communicative functions in an intermediate language course, while still needing to practice some beginning level topics. Therefore, instruction driven by proficiency descriptors wouldn't automatically guarantee that a student has achieved their current level. It would, nonetheless, help ensure rigor, accountability, and long-term acquisition of the target language.

Author's Note

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