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# Measuring Bilingual Proficiency Development in Translation and Interpreting Programs: John Jay College of Criminal Justice

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## Case Study

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## Summary

At John Jay College of Criminal Justice, students in the Certificate in Spanish Legal Translating & Interpreting program develop strong bilingual skills for careers in legal translation and court interpreting. As a Hispanic-Serving Institution (HSI), the program serves a diverse population of heritage Spanish speakers and second-language learners of English, emphasizing both professional preparation and bilingual language development.

The three-semester certificate program combines language instruction with specialized training in legal translation and interpreting, preparing students for certification exams, including those from the American Translators Association (ATA). To better understand how this professional training contributes to language development, the program integrated ACTFL® assessments to measure students' oral proficiency in both English and Spanish.

*Professional translation and interpreting training requires students to make complex, real-world communicative decisions—something traditional grammar and vocabulary-based language tests don't fully capture.*

*—Cristina Lozano Argüelles, Ph.D.,  
Assistant Professor, Department of Modern Languages and  
Literatures at John Jay College of Criminal Justice*

Using ACTFL assessments allowed faculty to benchmark the language proficiency of students in the certificate program at the beginning and end of the semester, providing valuable insights into bilingual development across varied learner profiles, in addition to qualifying for their job roles with industry-required translation and interpretation exams.

## Challenges

1. Need for a standardized, externally validated framework to compare proficiency across two languages (English and Spanish).
2. Lack of assessment tools that accurately capture the functional language abilities of heritage speakers from varied backgrounds.
3. Moving beyond grammar-based testing toward real-world communicative assessment.
4. Interest in measuring whether translation and interpreting training leads to measurable gains in bilingual proficiency.

*Many traditional language assessments underestimate heritage speakers' abilities.*

*—Cristina Lozano Argüelles, Ph.D.,  
Assistant Professor, Department of Modern Languages and  
Literatures at John Jay College of Criminal Justice*

# Solutions

1. Implementation of ACTFL proficiency-based assessments aligned with real-world language use; provides a framework to compare proficiency across languages.
2. Alignment of program goals with the [ACTFL Proficiency Guidelines](#) in addition to the performance criteria assessed by industry-specific testing provided by ATA.
3. Use of the OPIc ([Oral Proficiency Interview – computer](#)), which assesses spontaneous, functional language use in real-world communicative contexts.
4. Pre- and post-semester testing in both English and Spanish to measure student growth in language proficiency (whether heritage speakers or new learners of either English or Spanish).

*We needed an assessment that measured functional language use—not just isolated grammar knowledge.*

*—Cristina Lozano Argüelles, Ph.D.,  
Assistant Professor, Department of Modern Languages and  
Literatures at John Jay College of Criminal Justice*

# Outcomes

1. Established clear benchmarks for bilingual oral proficiency at specific points in the semester (pre-/post-).
2. Highlighted that the greatest gains occurred among students with lower starting proficiency levels across both language groups.
3. Increased student engagement and motivation through official proficiency certification.
4. Provided evidence that translation and interpreting training supports functional bilingual development; and
5. Strengthened program evaluation and curriculum development through data-driven insights.

*Students with lower starting proficiency levels made the greatest gains over the semester.*

*—Cristina Lozano Argüelles, Ph.D.,  
Assistant Professor, Department of  
Modern Languages and Literatures at  
John Jay College of Criminal Justice*

## Challenges/Needs

The certificate program aims to prepare students for professional roles requiring high-level bilingual communication, particularly in legal contexts. While students must enter with strong language skills in English and Spanish, the program needed a reliable way to assess whether instruction was effectively preparing them for successful industry testing as well as helping them develop their bilingual proficiency.

Traditional translation and interpretation assessments often fail to capture the communicative strengths of heritage learners or allow for meaningful comparison across languages. Faculty required an assessment tool that could evaluate real-world language use, reflect the complexity of translation and interpreting tasks, and provide comparable results in both English and Spanish.

*“We needed a way to evaluate how students use language in context—not just what they know about it.”*

*—Cristina Lozano Argüelles, Ph.D.,  
Assistant Professor, Department of Modern Languages and  
Literatures at John Jay College of Criminal Justice*



## Solution(s)

To address these needs, the program partnered with Language Testing International (LTI) to implement ACTFL assessments as part of a grant-funded research initiative through CILC (Center for Integrated Language Communities), one of the National Language Resource Centers that had been funded by the U.S. Department of Education.

The OPIc was selected due to its efficiency, cost-effectiveness, and ability to assess multiple students at once. Students completed the OPIc in both English and Spanish at the beginning and end of the semester, enabling a pre- and post-test design.

*“The OPIc allowed us to collect data simultaneously from all students while keeping costs manageable.”*

*—Cristina Lozano Argüelles, Ph.D.,  
Assistant Professor, Department of Modern Languages and  
Literatures at John Jay College of Criminal Justice*

ACTFL assessments were chosen because they:

- Align with nationally recognized proficiency guidelines.
- Provide comparable measures across multiple languages.
- Have demonstrated reliability with heritage learners.
- Focus on functional, real-world language use.



## Implementation

During the grant development phase, faculty collaborated with LTI to identify appropriate assessments and include testing costs in the project budget. Careful selection of test forms ensured alignment with students' expected proficiency levels.

Assessments were administered in a proctored, synchronous online environment. Students accessed the OPlc platform on their computers while simultaneously connecting with the researcher via a secondary device for monitoring and support.

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LTI provided guidance on account setup, test selection, and troubleshooting, ensuring a smooth implementation process.

*Providing extra time for the first testing session was essential—students needed time to get comfortable with the format.*

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## Outcomes

The use of ACTFL assessments yielded valuable insights into student learning and program effectiveness. Faculty were able to track proficiency development over time and identify patterns across different learner groups.

Students who initially placed at Intermediate levels made notable progress, with all participants advancing beyond that range by the end of the semester.

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Receiving an official ACTFL certificate boosted confidence and motivation, reinforcing the value of their bilingual skills in a professional context.

Assessment results also informed curriculum revisions, leading to more targeted language and interpreting activities.

*For many students, this was the first time their bilingual abilities were formally recognized.*

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Assistant Professor, Department of  
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## Conclusion

ACTFL assessments have enhanced the rigor and effectiveness of the translation and interpreting program at John Jay College of Criminal Justice by providing reliable, standardized measures of bilingual proficiency.

*“The assessments gave us real data to demonstrate the impact of our program to administrators.”*

*—Cristina Lozano Argüelles, Ph.D.,  
Assistant Professor, Department of Modern Languages and  
Literatures at John Jay College of Criminal Justice*

The data supports both instructional improvements and broader research showing that translation and interpreting training can drive language development among diverse bilingual learners.

# Recommendations

Faculty encourages other programs, particularly those in fields such as criminal justice, business, law, and international studies, to adopt proficiency-based language assessment with an ACTFL certificate.

*Students need to see their bilingualism as a professional asset—not just an informal skill.*

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Assistant Professor, Department of Modern Languages and  
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Key recommendations include:

- Use functional proficiency assessments rather than grammar-based tests.
- Support both heritage and second-language learners.
- Build stakeholder trust through data and student success stories.
- Clearly communicate the value of an ACTFL certificate to students and faculty.
- Foster collaboration across departments to sustain long-term success.

If you are interested in learning more, feel free to contact Language Testing International (LTI).

