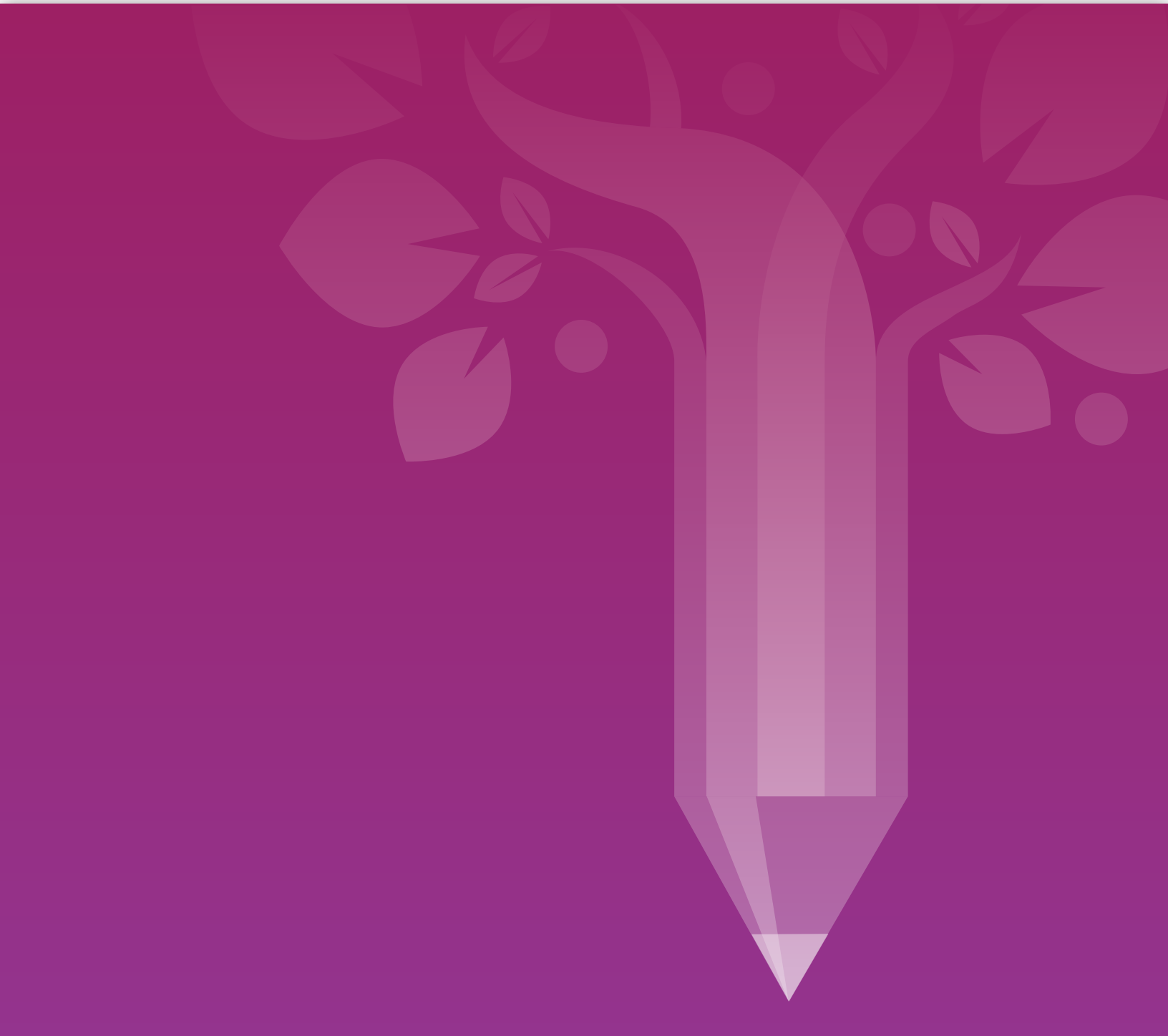


The ACTFL Listening and Reading Proficiency Benchmarking Study



How important is it to know the proficiency levels of your students? A recent study by Erwin Tschirner suggests that it may be critical to assess students' proficiency levels in all modes of communication, including interpretive reading and listening, for program building, curriculum development, and for determining the most appropriate teaching and learning approaches as well as the most appropriate media to use for instruction.

College-level, foreign language programs that use analytics may have a decisive edge over programs that do not with respect to student happiness, retention, and success. Tschirner's study highlights the fact that listening and reading skills develop differently for different languages and that it is vital for the profession to understand how they influence each other and how developing advanced levels of listening and reading proficiency may be indispensable for the development of advanced levels of speaking and writing proficiency.

Why is it so difficult to achieve advanced levels of oral proficiency at graduation, even for foreign language majors who studied abroad for one or two semesters? Tschirner's study suggests that it may be the lack of a principled approach to developing listening proficiency, especially interpretive listening in many college-level, foreign language programs. While reading proficiency far outpaces speaking proficiency within a four-year foreign language program, listening lags significantly behind and may be the main reason for the well-established Advanced barrier in speaking proficiency. This disparity between reading on one hand and listening and speaking on the other hand appears to be even more pronounced for deep-orthography languages such as French that have an opaque writing system, in which it is not easy to infer the pronunciation of a word from the way it is written. These are tantalizing questions in need of much further research. The study presented in this White Paper was designed to shed some light on the issues involved.

THE ACTFL LISTENING AND READING BENCHMARK STUDY PROVIDES SOME ANSWERS

In order to provide realistic and comprehensive responses to these questions, ACTFL conducted the Listening and Reading Benchmark Study with the participation of 21 U.S. universities and colleges. The ACTFL Listening and Reading Proficiency Tests (LPT and RPT) were administered to first, second, third, and fourth-year students over a 12-month period (May 12, 2014 to May 13, 2015).

The main research questions were:

- What levels of reading and listening proficiency can normally be found at major milestones in an undergraduate foreign language student's career?
- What is the relationship between reading and listening proficiency?

Number of participants by college year

Year	Reading	Listening
First Year	489	404
Second Year	1234	1106
Junior Year	1020	894
Senior Year	578	528
Total	3321	2932

Languages involved

More than half of all students tested were students of Spanish in addition to a sizable number of test-takers in French and German, and fewer participants in Italian, Japanese, Portuguese, and Russian.

The ACTFL Reading and Listening Proficiency Tests

The ACTFL RPT and LPT are standardized tests for the global assessment of reading and listening ability in a language (ACTFL, 2013, 2014). They measure how well a person spontaneously reads or listens when presented with texts, discourse, and tasks as described in the ACTFL Proficiency Guidelines 2012. Each test consists of ten to 25 reading texts or listening passages depending on the levels tested. There are five sublevels: IL, IM, AL, AM, and S. Each sublevel consists of five reading texts or listening passages accompanied by three tasks (items) with four multiple-choice responses; only one of which is correct. Test rubrics include genre, content area, rhetorical organization, reader/listener purpose, vocabulary, and, for LPTs, clarity of speech. These tests are Internet-administered and computer-scored (Institute for Test Research and Test Development, 2013a, 2013b).

SUBSTANTIVE FINDINGS

Reading and Listening Proficiency Levels of French and Spanish Students at Major Milestones

In general, the reading and listening proficiency of French and Spanish students increased the longer they studied their respective languages. There were large differences between reading and listening proficiency in both French and Spanish, however.

Students Reach Advanced Levels in Reading.

- 43% of second-semester students are Intermediate
- 55% of third-semester students are Intermediate
- **75% of fourth-semester students are at least Intermediate**
- 46% of third-year students are Advanced
- **65% of fourth-year students are Advanced**

- 67% of fourth-year French students are Advanced
- **76% of fourth-year Spanish students are Advanced**

In reading, French and Spanish students started at Novice High (NH) and developed in a similar fashion to Advanced Low (AL) by the fourth year, with French reading abilities slightly above Spanish ones, even though there was a slight drop for French students after the sixth semester going into the fourth year. In listening, French and Spanish students started at Novice Mid (NM) and also developed similarly until the fourth semester, when they reached NH. Starting in the fifth semester, students had considerably higher proficiencies. Because there was a sharp drop for French students after the sixth semester going into the fourth year, the difference between French and Spanish increased substantially, a difference of well over two sublevels, between Intermediate Low (IL) in French and Intermediate High (IH) in Spanish.

It is worth mentioning that returning missionaries who spent two years in a Spanish-speaking country had slightly higher reading and considerably higher listening proficiencies than fourth-year students, and that the difference between modalities for these students was less than one half of one sublevel. It is also interesting to note that the number of semesters students spend studying a language affects proficiency. For Spanish reading proficiency, there were no significant differences between the second and third semesters, but there were significant differences between the third, fourth, fifth, and sixth semesters, and the fourth year, representing a statistically significant mean progression from NH+ (third semester) to IL (fourth semester), to Intermediate Mid (IM -fifth semester), to IH (sixth semester) and AL (fourth year). For French reading proficiency, there was a statistically significant mean progression from NH+ (third semester) to IL+ (fourth semester), to IM (fifth semester), and IH+ (sixth semester).

Listening Proficiency Lags Behind

- 20% of second semester students are Intermediate
- 24% of third semester students are Intermediate
- **39% of fourth semester students are Intermediate**
- 24% of third year students are Advanced
- **39% of fourth year students are Advanced**
- 53% of fourth-year Spanish students are Advanced
- **18% of fourth-year French students are Advanced**
- 90% of students with a two-year immersion experience are Advanced

As for the Listening modality, the correlations show that, for Spanish, there was a statistically significant mean progression from NH (fourth semester) to IL+ (fifth semester), to IM (sixth semester), and IH (fourth year). For French, while there was a mean progression from NM (second semester) to NM+ (third and fourth semesters) to NH+ (fifth semester) and IL+ (sixth semester), the only statistically significant progression was from the fifth to the sixth semester. Note that the mean proficiency of fourth-year students was lower than the sixth-semester mean.

The Urgent Need for Principled Approaches to Teaching Listening Skills

Listening proficiency seemed to be a different matter entirely. One of the most significant findings of the study was the fact that listening proficiency was lower than reading proficiency at almost all levels of instruction and across all languages. The listening proficiency mean in French and Spanish was generally one sublevel lower than the reading proficiency mean in the second and third year, and it was two sublevels lower in the fourth year. This may be a reflection of what the profession considers important in foreign language education and the consequence of listening proficiency not being considered important enough for college credit.

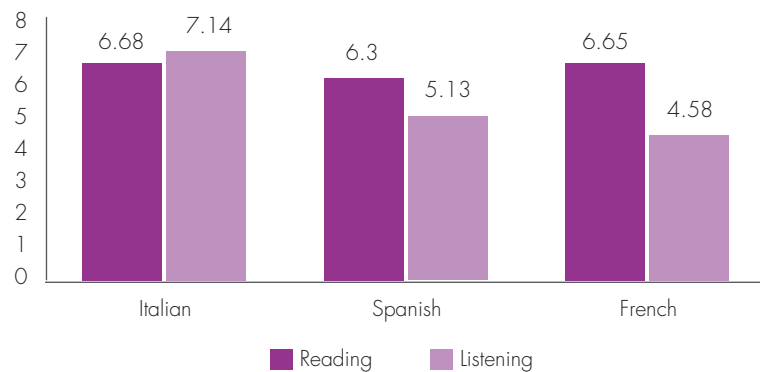
Reading and Listening Levels of German, Italian, Portuguese, and Russian Students at Major Milestones

In general, German, Italian, and Portuguese students were IL or IM in reading and NH or IL in listening in their fourth semester. In their third year, students were IH and AL in reading and listening in the Romance languages except for Portuguese listening, where students continued to be IM, on average. As was the case with the Spanish students who spent two years abroad on a mission, returning missionaries who were in a German-speaking country were AL in listening.

LANGUAGE DISTANCE AND DIFFERENT ORTHOGRAPHIES AND THE DIFFERENCE THEY MAKE

The statistical figures obtained from the data this study collected demonstrate that it took longer for participating students to reach a particular proficiency rating in listening than in reading for all languages and for all proficiency levels.

Reading Listening Gap

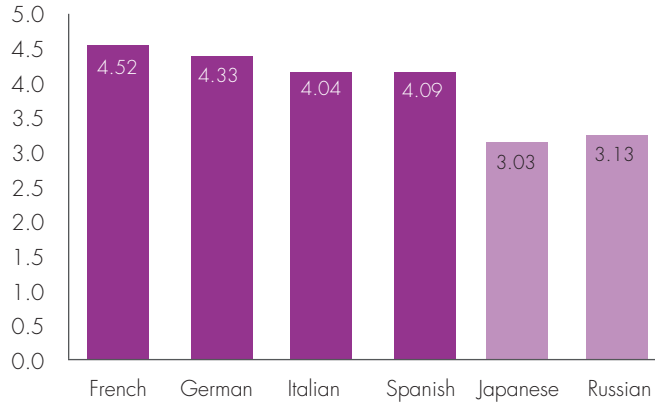


Similar reading and listening proficiency levels in Italian: one sublevel difference in Spanish, two sublevels difference in French (third year means)

The discrepancy between listening and reading for French may be due to its deep orthography in addition to the lack of continued development of listening proficiency in French beyond the second year, which may have also been due to upper division courses being taught in English.

Languages that have deep orthographies have an opaque writing system, in which it is not easy to infer the pronunciation of a syllable or word by the way it is written. Words, therefore, need to be learned twice, as visual and aural entities, and words learned visually are not easily accessible when listening. Listening and reading proficiency, therefore, diverge, and gains made in reading may not translate to listening.

Language Distance

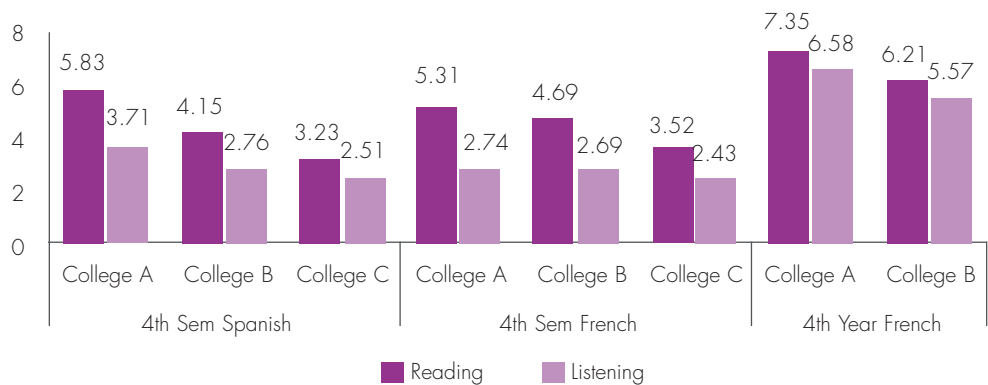


Fourth-semester reading levels are similar in French, German, Italian, and Spanish (mean: IL) and one sublevel lower in Japanese and Russian (mean: NH).

Programs Matter

To get a better sense of how different programs give different results, it will be useful to take a look at the table below to see the gaps between listening and reading proficiency levels attained in different college programs.

Program Distances



KEY TAKEAWAYS FROM THE STUDY

It may be time to rethink the role of foreign language education for academic purposes in the United States and the role of foreign language proficiency within a liberal arts curriculum. Taking into account the lessons learned from this study would benefit the students, in particular, and the profession, in general:

- It is possible to achieve Advanced levels in reading proficiency as early as the fourth semester.
- Listening proficiency seems to develop at a significantly slower rate than reading.
- Listening proficiency in French seems to develop more slowly than in other languages and appears to stall at IM even going into the fourth year.
- There seems to be increasing recognition of the need to develop principled approaches toward improving listening proficiency, and to a lesser extent reading proficiency, throughout the undergraduate foreign language experience.
- A focus on listening proficiency may not only help the profession to succeed in providing students with useful, professional and academic foreign language listening skills, but it may even be the key to developing professional speaking skills as well.
- While reading proficiency levels, especially for cognate languages, appear to be much higher than speaking levels and close to what one might expect at various points in a post-secondary program, more principled approaches to reading proficiency may allow learners to reach the Advanced High and Superior levels.
- Assessing students' listening and reading proficiency levels is vital to making informed decisions about teaching and learning.
- Because the ACTFL Proficiency Guidelines afford a developmental perspective, they provide a framework for secondary and post-secondary foreign language departments with respect to aligning goals and curricula across the learning experience, and to set proficiency goals for major milestones in a student's career.
- The ACTFL frameworks and assessments for speaking and writing have already had a major impact on curriculum and instruction. It is time to do the same for listening and reading.



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