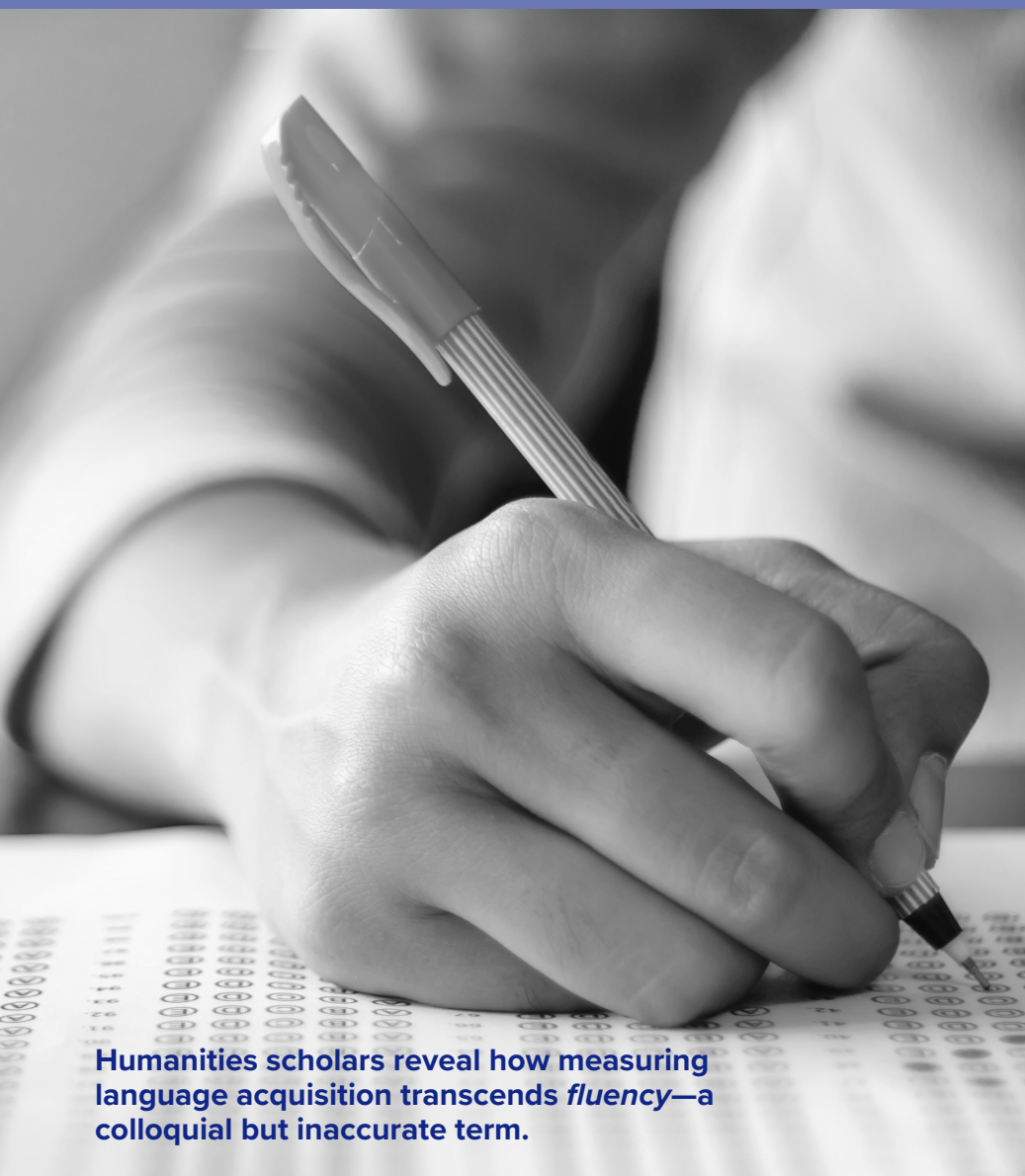


# VARIETIES OF PROFICIENCY



**Humanities scholars reveal how measuring language acquisition transcends *fluency*—a colloquial but inaccurate term.**

by Lydia Hall (Interdisciplinary Humanities '23) and Ellie Smith (English '23)

## “I WANT TO BE FLUENT.”

This is a common response to the question “What is your goal for your second language?” Each semester, thousands of students enroll in language classes in the College of Humanities, aiming to become fluent in their target languages. From an academic language acquisition standpoint, fluency, while an admirable goal, is a vague term. For example, the chair of the Department of German & Russian, Professor Jennifer Bown (Second Language Acquisition), explains that fluency “is based on an individual’s speech patterns, including rate of speech, number of pauses, filler words, and hesitations.” Fluency only represents part of holistic language proficiency. At the basic level, language proficiency is composed of a person’s ability to speak fluently, form complex ideas and sentences, and communicate accurately in the language.

“All right,” the student says. “I want to be proficient.” But measuring a person’s ability to use language proficiently varies from language to language and across learning contexts. As Assistant Professor Michael Child (Portuguese, Second Language Acquisition)

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says, “We can’t get at proficiency directly; we can only measure its secondary effects.” As the easiest secondary effect to notice, fluency often hogs the spotlight and overshadows other aspects of proficiency. In a study about the correlation between fluency and proficiency across five different languages, professors at BYU found that fluency can categorize learners broadly. Bown, one of the researchers, says, “Fluency can actually be a proxy for proficiency.” However, more comprehensive measurements of proficiency provide more specific and applicable feedback for language learners. At BYU, professors refine the way proficiency is measured and defined to assess students’ capabilities and help them grow, improve educational methods, and promote bilingualism as a connecting and empowering lifelong ability.

#### VARIETIES OF TESTING

One way BYU faculty measure proficiency is using the language proficiency guidelines set by the American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages (ACTFL), which categorizes language learners into five major levels (from lowest to highest): Novice, Intermediate, Advanced, Superior, and Distinguished.

Three categories—Novice, Intermediate, and Advanced—are further divided into Low, Mid, and High sublevels. Students wishing to have their ACTFL proficiency measured take two standardized tests, the Oral Proficiency Interview (OPI) and the Writing Proficiency Test (WPT), which each provide a report from ACTFL that certifies students’ proficiency levels and outlines weak areas that students can work on to reach the next sublevel.

These reports help students and professors understand the strengths and weaknesses in their language proficiency. As a certified OPI trainer through ACTFL, Associate Professor Troy Cox (Language Learning and Assessment) works to integrate these OPI results into his classes. He creates curricula that use the Aims of a BYU Education, essential job skills, and ACTFL guidelines to identify weak areas and build proficiency beyond the classroom. As he explains, starting with the ACTFL proficiency guidelines and designing curriculum that pushes students towards excellence in those areas has much better results than teaching a bunch of topics and then formulating a test. Cox says, “The way you assess becomes the de facto teaching

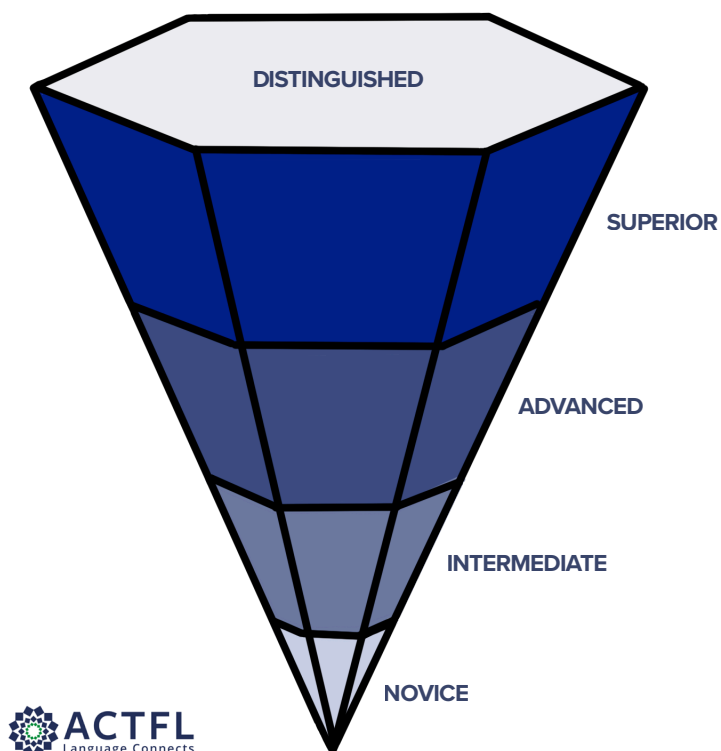
and learning philosophy.” The OPI and WPT identify both proficiency and areas to improve upon, creating continued growth rather than complacency in students and professors alike.

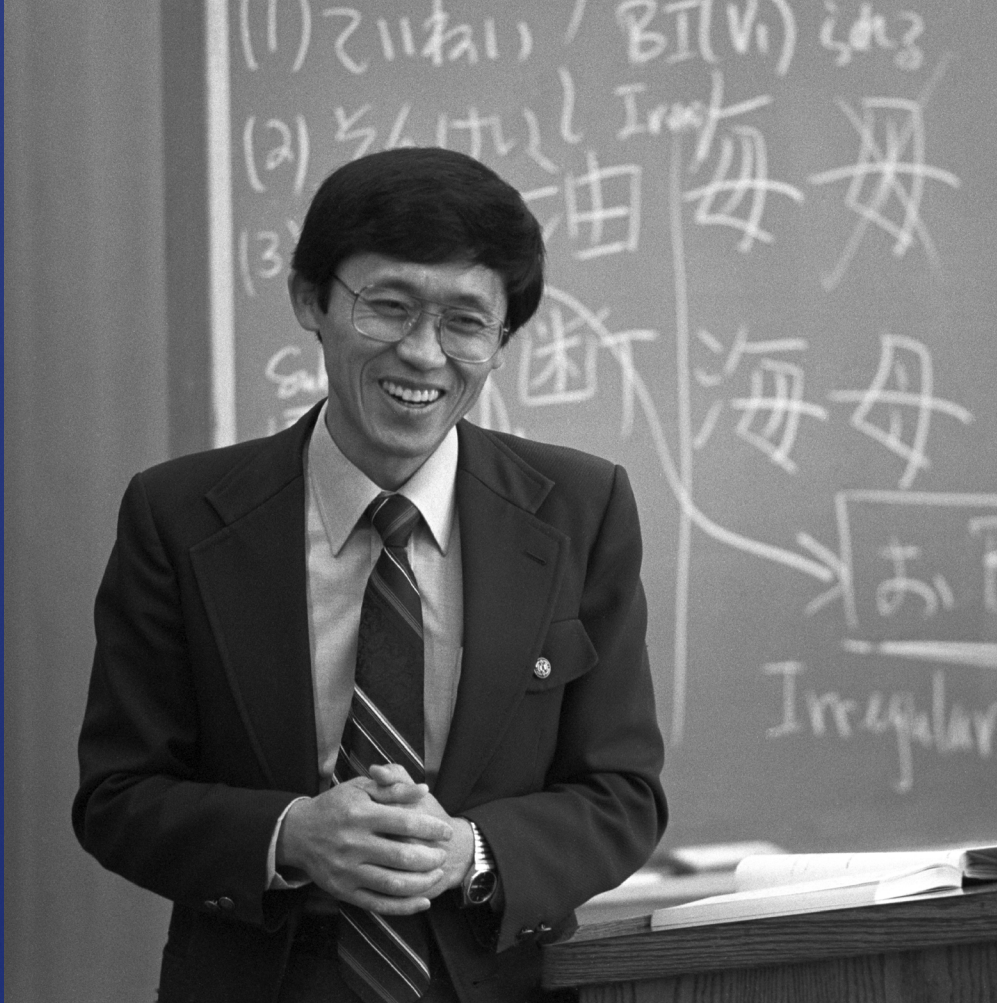
While the OPI and WPT help professors and students understand their current language skills, the tests also are a tool for students as they pursue their future careers. Assistant Teaching Professor Lauren Truman (Spanish, Dual Language Education) says the certification they receive after taking these tests helps students assert, “I can do what I’m specialized in, and I can do it in a global economy.” These tests are required to receive a language certificate, which helps students verify their skills to future employers, and are encouraged for those who major or minor in a language.

The OPI and WPT are helpful to both professors and students; however, self-assessment is often more feasible and economical. Associate Professor Matthew Wilcox, the associate director of measurement and evaluation for the Center for Language Studies, and his team designed LASER (Language Ability Self-Evaluation Resource) to foster self-motivated, lifelong language learning. In describing the program, which is free for students, he says, “It’s not a standard test; it’s for you to assess your ability, help you find the gaps, and then for instructors to use that to improve student learning.”

LASER consists of two parts. The first set of questions gathers students’ language learning background and asks them to self-assess their proficiency. The second part of the test gives writing prompts in the target language calibrated to the student’s earlier responses. To achieve this, Wilcox’s team designed LASER to look for patterns in the writing—word count, type-token ratio, mean length of utterance, fluency, and number of pauses—to determine the test-taker’s command of the language. Free testing allows self-motivated individuals to continue honing their skills outside of class and helps professors know how to improve their students’ proficiency.

While LASER evaluates proficiency with writing samples, and the OPI uses speaking and listening skills, the College also engages in other types of language evaluation. For example, Greek Exams consist of 40 multiple choice grammar and translation questions, with no writing, speaking, or listening elements involved. These nation-wide exams,





Japanese Class, October 4, 1988. Dr. Masukazu Watabe.  
Photo by Mark Philbrick / BYU Photo

hosted by the Classical Association of the Middle West and South, determine proficiency in ancient Greek for college students across the country. In both 2020 and 2021, BYU students took home the Phinney Greek Prize for achieving perfect scores on the test. Fluency of speech in a dead language is practically impossible, and ultimately unproductive as a tool to measure proficiency, when the learner only encounters the language in the classroom, research, or translation. However, gaining proficiency in these ancient languages allows history and art—*The Iliad*, for example—to be preserved for speakers of other languages to enjoy.

#### PROFICIENCY IN AND OUT OF THE CLASSROOM

Language learning also occurs outside the classroom, so BYU students often enter language classes at varying levels of proficiency. Amy Irvin, Technology and Assessment Coordinator for BYU's English Language Center (ELC), says, "Different groups of students experience different challenges when trying to improve their language proficiency." Students from a grammar-heavy background, such as dual-language immersion programs,

tend to struggle in conversational settings, but excel in writing. Students who have a conversation-heavy background, such as returned missionaries or heritage learners, tend to have a good grasp of conversational language and be comfortable speaking, but are more uncertain of grammar principles and writing.

Some students, such as Lexy Duncan (Psychology, French Studies '23), studied a foreign language in primary or secondary school before coming to BYU. Duncan studied French in high school and developed a genuine love of the language. She says, "After all that time in school, I could read and write okay, but my comprehension and speaking abilities were severely lacking." She then served a French-speaking mission in Montréal, Canada. Though lacking the structure of a classroom, her mission offered authentic experiences with native speakers from across the francophone world, including Haiti, France, and Québec. She says, "Classroom experience largely contributes to my language abilities because I like the structure, and I like being able to master topics before moving on. However, authentic experiences

such as missions and study abroad programs helped me solidify and practice what I learn, which I can't always do in the classroom."

In addition to study abroad programs, another resource available to BYU students who want to experience their language on a daily basis is the Language Immersion Student Residence (LISR) program. In the LISR students can earn experiential learning credit, learn about another culture, and practice their language skills all from the comfort of their apartment. Students in the program live in apartments with two other language learners and one native speaker of their target language. The students speak in only their target language at home, ensuring that they each get plenty of practice speaking and listening.

Assistant Professor Steve Moody (Japanese Linguistics) and Assistant Professor Shin Tsuchiya (Japanese Language Acquisition) conducted a study on social interaction in the LISR's Japanese House and analyzed how varied proficiency levels affected the learning environment. They found that many of the students were proficient enough to communicate but created unnatural phrases in their target language. These phrases communicated meaning in an understandable way but sounded strange to native speakers. Though this kind of speech is sometimes called "abominable fluency," these students are responding to the demands of their environment quickly and effectively—which is an important element of proficiency.

Another group of language learners at BYU are heritage learners—students whose parents' first language is not English. Truman explained the wide range of experiences that



heritage learners face when learning their parents' or grandparents' language. Some families try not to speak their first language after immigrating in order to assimilate into the United States' culture, especially since most schools teach in English. However, stunting proficiency in the first language in favor of the second is ultimately a disadvantage to the child. Truman says, "All the research shows that the more you build your first language, the better your second language is going to be." Other heritage learners have well-developed speaking and listening skills, but struggle with grammar and spelling. Heritage learners, returned missionaries, and dual immersion and classroom students each enter BYU with different strengths and weaknesses. College of Humanities faculty create a welcoming environment and provide opportunities for students to increase all aspects of their language proficiency.

#### BILINGUAL LIFE

Building language proficiency often starts with *relexification*, meaning seeking a one-to-one relationship between the words of the learner's mother tongue and their second language (*Hola* means *Hello* means *Bonjour* means . . . ). With consistent practice, neural pathways in the brain develop until the learner can draw from two full languages to express themselves. "Bilinguals are qualitatively different," Child says. "They are not just two monolinguals in one person. The way that languages are organized and stored and accessed in the brain is different than when you just have one language system, because you have two language systems."


Assistant Professor Ellen Knell (Associate Director for Curriculum and Instruction, Center for Language Studies) and Assistant Professor Jeffrey Green (Linguistics) are trying to measure when that second language system emerges in Chinese learners' brains. Language learners are not always aware of their own knowledge because of latency between when they connect words and definitions and when they recognize or vocalize those connections. This latency, combined with the complexity of the brain itself, means that researchers who want to measure when language learning begins approach measuring proficiency differently than those who study more advanced learners.

In Knell and Green's study, participants' brainwaves and brain oxygen levels were measured by an electroencephalography machine (EEG)

and monitored with functional near-infrared spectroscopy (fNIRS). Each participant was shown a series of Chinese words, then had to identify if each word was real or made up. Though the data is still being processed, Knell hopes that the brainwaves will move in specific ways when shown a real word and move differently when presented with a false word, indicating early language learning.

Once people have learned to identify real and false words, built their skills from basic conversation to more advanced grammar, and have command of the language, they often swap back and forth between their languages as the situation requires—a process called code-switching. In the past, code-switching was derided because it was thought that people who code-switched did not speak either of their languages well, but research shows the opposite. Truman says, "Bilinguals are incredibly good at language; so good that they can navigate two languages within the same paragraph and know when to switch and when they cannot switch."

accent or avoid certain usage. Child says, "People have an idea that language is perfect, and there's one way to speak, and that's not true." Languages shift and grow as they are used, accommodating whatever a person needs and providing more with every effort to become more proficient.

BYU students enter and exit language classes with different interests, accents, backgrounds, and proficiencies that reflect their individual lives and needs. College of Humanities faculty know that understanding proficiency improves our ability to learn and improve our language abilities whether that is through customized suggestions from tests, such as LASER or the OPI, or through immersive experiences in other cultures. As we become more proficient in our second language, we unlock the door to new concepts, cultures, and connections, ultimately expanding our worldview, preserving our history, and enjoying the breadth of human experience. 

**"As frustrating as it is to not be able to translate a word into your native language, it means that your brain is carving out its own little niche, and that's sort of a beautiful thing."**

The only thing that bilingual people have more trouble with than monolinguals is trying to find that word on the tip of their tongue. Cox says, "As frustrating as it is to not be able to translate a word into your native language, it means that your brain is carving out its own little niche, and that's sort of a beautiful thing."

#### THE NATURE OF PROFICIENCY

Learning in diverse contexts such as classes, missionary training, study abroad programs, and practice sessions with friends and media leads to individualized versions of the language, what Truman calls an idiolect. A Spanish learner might choose to speak with a Colombian accent but borrow words from Spain and Mexico, creating an idiolect of Spanish unique to that person. Not everyone likes this kind of linguistic freedom, and some insist that learners adopt a specific