Everything you need to know about language proficiency testing

Executive summary

Becoming proficient in another language is what every language learner aspires to and what every language training program strives to deliver to its learners. Being able to understand and be understood is ultimately the goal of language learning, but within that objective lies a wide range of proficiency. Efforts to capture language proficiency with labels like beginner, intermediate, or advanced often don't define what those terms mean when it comes to demonstrating confidence and competence in real-world conversations.

It's imperative to assess and identify levels of proficiency among learners both as a tool for placement and as a measure of progress in language training. This requires delving into what language proficiency means and how to best measure it across languages. Our research-based approach has led to the development of proficiency testing that carefully considers different types of language learning and allows assessment of the conversational skills needed to effectively communicate with native speakers.

Rosetta Stone proficiency tests are an essential tool for clients who rely on our expertise to help their global workforce become confident and successful communicators across multiple languages.

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Introduction

Not all learners begin their language learning journey at the same departure point. Some have previous experience with a second language as part of their educational background. Other learners might have spoken a language as a child but have conversational skills rusty with disuse. This is sometimes referred to as language readiness and encompasses how prepared a learner is to receive instruction. Presenting engaging lessons that pique a learner's interest but don't overwhelm, sometimes referred to in education as the "Goldilocks Principle," can be a difficult but vital balance to strike in language learning.[1]

Having learners self-assess and reach into a grab bag of loosely grouped language skills can be an arbitrary way to identify proficiency levels or prescribe placement. Instead, let us take a closer look at how language proficiency is defined around the world and what the proficiency scale looks like when a common definition and universal standards can be reached.

What is language proficiency?

In the simplest terms, language proficiency is a measurement of how well a speaker can use and understand language in real-world settings. Proficiency in a language involves demonstrating a variety of skills, including the ability to apply those skills confidently in unrehearsed conversations.[2]

However, there is much more than meets the eye when it comes to the language skills needed for effective conversations. Take for instance an interaction on the street between a language learner asking directions from a native speaker. While this commonplace situation may seem simple, it employs and demonstrates a variety of language skills. Not only does the learner need vocabulary and proper pronunciation to communicate the request for directions, but listening skills will also be required to understand the response. Furthermore, if the directions require written instructions or consulting street signs, the learner needs a repertoire of reading and writing skills to translate and take action.

Listening, speaking, reading, and writing skills are the backbone of effective communication but every learner will have varying degrees of competence in each of these areas.[3] Language proficiency scales are an effort to measure these strengths and quantify areas for improvement across skill groups. Rosetta Stone proficiency tests specifically enable language learners to use a pedagogically sound measure of proficiency to better understand what they currently know, what they feel confident demonstrating, and what they still need to learn and practice applying.

No matter how proficiency is defined, the goal is the same for both learners and the language programs that support them. Ultimately, progress is measured as a learner moves towards a greater understanding of the language and builds confidence using it in spontaneous interactions. To quantify that progress on a standardized scale, Rosetta Stone went back to the fundamentals to establish the use of a research-based measurement of proficiency that effectively and fairly assesses a variety of language skills.

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You've completed the Rosetta Stone English Pre-test. Your test results are explained

...ding and Listening test results indicate that you are ready to study content at CEFR Level B2.

A2   B1   **B2**   C1   C1+

How proficiency tests work and why they matter

Robust and pedagogically sound proficiency tests should provide more than a means to place learners in a program depending on their language ability. These tests should chart a course that measures progress in a language learning journey.

A variety of assessment tools currently exist to quantify and compare proficiency levels. However, a closer look at the standards these tools are based on show the ongoing friction in both capturing a variety of language skills and finding a measurement for proficiency that works across languages.

What are language proficiency tests?

Language proficiency tests are assessment tools that measure a learner's language abilities and capture those skills on a scale of proficiency. These tools have traditionally been used as a means to place learners in a program that meets their needs, but can also be employed to measure progress towards learning a language.

There are myriad proficiency tests recognized internationally, but each applies its own framework and the standards can be difficult to compare across languages.[4] Ultimately, the goal is to find a shared terminology and universal scale across multiple languages that can be used to get a sound measurement of language proficiency.

Are there recognized standards for language proficiency?

The two major frameworks currently in use globally to assess language proficiency are the ACTFL and the CEFR. The ACTFL (American Council on Teaching Foreign Languages) is primarily a US-based set of standards accompanied by a testing and certification program.[5] The CEFR (Common European Framework of Reference for Languages) identifies a set of standards for proficiency levels that can be applied across multiple languages, including English.[6]

The ACTFL (American Council on Teaching Foreign Languages) – The ACTFL defines five thresholds or levels of language proficiency in reading, writing, listening, and speaking skills. The labels attached to these levels are novice, intermediate, advanced, superior, and distinguished. Each of these five levels is further broken down into three sublevels indicating high, medium, or low language skill acquisition.[7]

The ILR (International Language Roundtable) – Another scale called the ILR was developed by the United States Foreign Service Institute for use in the federal government. The ILR relies on a similar 5-level framework as the ACTFL, but instead assigns those skill thresholds numbers such as elementary proficiency (S-1), limited working proficiency (S-2), professional working proficiency (S-3), full professional proficiency (S-4) and native or bilingual proficiency (S-5).[8]

The CEFR (Common European Framework of Reference for Languages) – The CEFR is perhaps the most widely accepted framework for assessing language proficiency. As part of a collaboration by the Council of Europe in the 1990s, the CEFR was launched to clarify standards for language proficiency across employers and educational institutions and to develop worldwide standards for language proficiency.

Because this set of standards is intended as a framework of reference for languages in general, the CEFR is often cited by other language proficiency organizations such as the ACTFL. Endorsed by the United Nations, CEFR is also the basis of the UN Working Language Proficiency standards that describe language competence levels for UN staff members.[9] Accepted globally and used internationally, the CEFR framework is considered by many language experts to be the best available set of proficiency standards for international use.[10]

The CEFR framework uses a set of "can do" statements or learning objectives to define what learners should be able to demonstrate at each of the six levels of proficiency. This leveling is designed to ensure that gaps in knowledge can be addressed and progress can be scaled. The CEFR proficiency levels are identified on page 6.

The CEFR has become the most widely used and influential set of language proficiency standards and was recently updated by the Council of Europe's 47 member states.[11] **This widely accepted framework is the basis of the standards used to develop many language proficiency tests, including the ones Rosetta Stone delivers.**

How do proficiency tests work?

Using a set of standards or framework as a guideline, proficiency tests seek to measure a language learner's abilities by assessing the following four key communication skill areas.

Listening: This skill area focuses on a learner's ability to understand language spoken in conversation and covers a broad range of vocabulary acquisition.
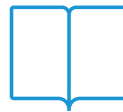
Reading: From reading simple signs or menus to academic texts, reading skills capture the ability to understand a language in written form.

Speaking: This skill area encompasses a learner's ability to use the language in conversations and produce speech that can effectively communicate meaning in a variety of settings.

Writing: Being able to convey meaning through the written word is another language skill area that covers a range of actions from simple texts to detailed articles or long-form papers.

Speaking and writing are often referred to as productive or active language skills because they require the output or production of language. Likewise, listening and reading are referred to as receptive or passive communication skills because they involve the reception or input of language. While these language skill areas may capture different functions of learning, they are all equally important components of communication that language proficiency tests seek to measure.[12]

Based on the measurement of these key language skill areas, proficiency tests attempt to place a user in a level of language learning that best fits their current competency. **The success of language learning relies to a significant extent on the ability of proficiency tests to accurately assess knowledge and to provide the right placement that will boost confidence while still encouraging growth.**

The CEFR scale at a glance

BEGINNER LEARNERS

A1
Beginner

Can understand and use familiar everyday expressions and very basic phrases aimed at the satisfaction of needs of a concrete type. Can introduce him/herself and others and can ask and answer questions about personal details such as where he/she lives, people he/she knows, and things he/she has. Can interact in a simple way provided the other person talks slowly and clearly and is prepared to help.

A2
Beginner

Can understand sentences and frequently used expressions related to areas of most immediate relevance (e.g. very basic personal and family information, shopping, local geography, employment). Can communicate in simple and routine tasks requiring a simple and direct exchange of information on familiar and routine matters. Can describe in simple terms aspects of his/her background, immediate environment and matters in areas of immediate need.

A1-A2

INDEPENDENT LEARNERS

B1
Independent

Can understand the main points of clear standard input on familiar matters regularly encountered in work, school, leisure, etc. Can deal with most situations likely to arise whilst traveling in an area where the language is spoken. Can produce simple connected text on topicsthat are familiar or of personal interest. Can describe experiences and events, dreams, hopes & ambitions and briefly give reasons and explanations for opinions and plans.

B2
Independent

Can understand the main ideas of complex text on both concrete and abstract topics, including technical discussions in his/her field of specialization. Can interact with a degree of fluency and spontaneity that makes regular interaction with native speakers quite possible without strain for either party. Can produce clear, detailed text on a wide range of subjects and explain a viewpoint on a topical issue giving the advantages and disadvantages of various options.

B1-B2

PROFICIENT LEARNERS

C1
Advanced

Can understand a wide range of demanding, longer texts, and recognize implicit meaning. Can express him/herself fluently and spontaneously without much obvious searching for expressions. Can use language flexibly and effectively for social, academic, and professional purposes. Can produce clear, well-structured, detailed text on complex subjects, showing controlled use of organizational patterns, connectors, and cohesive devices.

C2
Proficient

Can understand with ease virtually everything heard or read. Can summarise information from different spoken and written sources, reconstructing arguments and accounts in a coherent presentation. Can express him/herself spontaneously, very fluently, and precisely, differentiating finer shades of meaning even in more complex situations.

C1-C2

Source: Global scale - Table 1 (CEFR 3.3): Common Reference levels
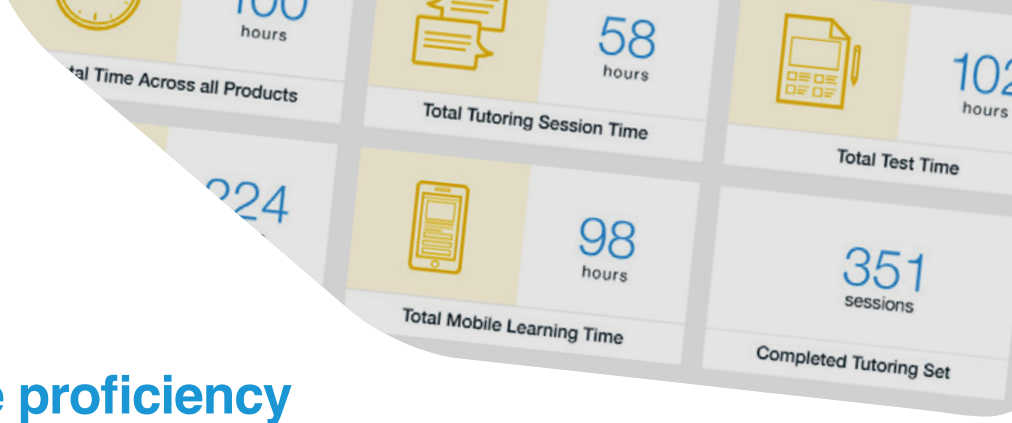
How Rosetta Stone measures language proficiency

Rosetta Stone has developed proficiency tests under the guidance of assessment experts with strict adherence to industry standards. Our assessment tools are also periodically evaluated and recalibrated. Rosetta Stone is committed to carefully considering the quality and appropriateness of each question, whether the test measures the intended skills, and that test items are appropriately leveled, fair, and unbiased.

Rosetta Stone learners initially engage a pre-test designed to evaluate language proficiency for the purpose of placement in the appropriate training solution. This pre-test tool has two components that include a questionnaire accompanied by a language proficiency test. Test scores align with standards from the CEFR (Common European Framework of Reference for Languages). In the case of English and Spanish, proficiency scores are also aligned with the Interagency Language Roundtable (ILR), while English and French are aligned to the Canadian Language Benchmarks (CLB).[13]

Your English (American) language goals

In order to help you get the most from Rosetta Stone, we would like to learn more about you and your English (American) language goals.

Estimated time to complete objectives:

🕐 **5 minutes**

[Start]

Once placement is determined, Rosetta Stone proficiency tests can continue to be administered both to provide an accurate measurement of a learner's proficiency and as a tool to assess progress. Engaging proficiency testing at appropriate intervals can help administrators of language training programs measure both learner engagement and quantify return on investment (ROI) on business language training initiatives.

> "
>
> *"Rosetta Stone for me is like a friend, first of all I took the test to know how and when I needed to start, and then taking courses and live coaches where my level was."*
>
> – Rosetta Stone® Enterprise English learner

> "
>
> *"After the assessment, you are offered lessons according to the level of comprehension of the person which is very helpful for those who want to improve their language learning."*
>
> – Rosetta Stone® Enterprise English learner

How does Rosetta Stone develop proficiency tests?

Rosetta Stone proficiency tests are developed by language assessment experts who perform periodic validation studies to develop and refine testing models. This standards-based approach determines the assessment score and CEFR level that best reflect the learner's language proficiency.

Rosetta Stone proficiency tests are also equated, which means that no matter which version of the test a learner receives for a given language, the level of challenge is the same. This ensures that assessment scores can be compared from test to test to measure changes in proficiency over time. Tests are designed to minimize the impact of randomized guesses and to encourage honesty so that learners aren't inadvertently placed in content that is uncomfortably difficult. To that end, Rosetta Stone's language proficiency tests are designed to begin with easier items and progress to more difficult questions.

Prior to engaging the proficiency tests, Rosetta Stone learners are asked to complete a questionnaire regarding their language background and learning goals. Responses from the questionnaire are taken into account and combined with the proficiency test score to determine appropriate placement in the language training solution.

Proficiency tests have three stages and can usually be completed in 30-45 minutes. Stages 1 and 2 of the proficiency tests are linear and encourage learners to demonstrate their knowledge of vocabulary, grammar, and reading comprehension. Stages 2 and 3 of the proficiency test offer additional items that assess listening comprehension and Stage 3 branches off with modules for both intermediate and advanced learners.

Beginning or intermediate learners with lower levels of proficiency can exit the test at Stage 1 or 2 while some advanced or intermediate learners are encouraged to complete Stage 3 of the assessment. Learners are urged to complete the test in one sitting and to use headphones to ensure the best audio experience. **When administered properly, Rosetta Stone proficiency tests in English, French, Spanish, and German have been determined to have a reliability of .90 or better that is consistent with TOEIC, TOEFL, and other internationally recognized tests.**[14]

Understanding and comparing your learner's results

In addition to engaging proficiency testing to ensure appropriate placement, Rosetta Stone also recommends administering the same proficiency tests at regular intervals to measure progress. As learners increase their scores and advance to higher levels of proficiency on the CEFR, certificates can be issued to mark these milestones in the language learning journey.

Test administrators can select "beginner" for someone who is new to the language and the proficiency test will default to a score of 40 (the lowest possible score) as a threshold to compare progress. It is not recommended to repeatedly test learners in order to achieve the desired proficiency scores. As a general rule of appropriate assessment, The National Reporting System for Adult Education (NRS) recommends a minimum of 30-120 hours of study between pretesting and posttesting.[15]

Rosetta Stone recommends prompting learners to retake proficiency tests after 150 days of language training and then to repeat testing at 300 days. The recommendation of 150-day testing intervals is based on historic data Rosetta Stone evaluated to determine the optimal assessment intervals to capture progress. However, testing intervals can be adjusted by administrators to achieve a balance that works for learners.

Rosetta Stone also offers administrators the ability to adjust programs and assess growth through the Learner Growth Report, which shows scaled test scores and tracks improvements. Just note that it's considered normal for beginners to make more progress initially because they have the most room for improvement compared to intermediate or advanced learners.

Improving proficiency scores

For language learners, it can be frustrating when progress stalls, and while some setbacks are to be expected, long stretches of stagnant proficiency usually indicate the need to spend more time in the product. Rosetta Stone recommends engaging in language lessons weekly to stay on track, avoid knowledge loss, and make sufficient progress. Accompanying lessons with live coaching is also recommended to maximize proficiency gains.

Making sufficient progress towards proficiency also depends on setting realistic goals upfront. As a result of evaluating the progress of more than a thousand Rosetta Stone adult learners in our English Foundations program, we've created the following recommendations for language training usage to ensure sufficient proficiency gains before engaging testing.

We recommend learners do the following before their next proficiency test to increase the likelihood of an improved score:

- Complete at least 4 units of course content (100% of a Level)

- Maintain activity throughout the study period allowing for only a few weeks hiatus

- Complete at least 26 hours of course content (does not include live coaching hours)

Ultimately, improved proficiency scores and progress towards language learning milestones rely on a learner's willingness and ability to engage with content consistently and in a meaningful way.

A study of Rosetta Stone learners found that a majority of learners improved their proficiency scores after completing between four to seven units of content. When combined with consistent online self-study, live coaching increased the rate of proficiency in as few as four sessions over a five-month period. **In fact, business learners with average online usage who engaged live coaching consistently experienced gains of up to 16.4% in proficiency compared to learners who did not engage coaching.[16]**

Conclusion

Rosetta Stone has proved that well-designed, standards-based proficiency testing can be a powerful tool to encourage engagement and demonstrate the success of language learning. In an analysis of 248 Rosetta Stone adult learners, there was a direct and consistent relationship between engagement with the product and improved proficiency scores. Learners who spent up to 42 minutes per week engaging in language lessons raised their proficiency scores an average of 13 points. Users with more regular use, greater than 42 minutes per week, experienced a 28-point increase in their proficiency scores[17]

Administered appropriately, Rosetta Stone proficiency tests can help businesses make the most of their investment in language training. And these proficiency scores can be used to help learners target their engagement in certain skill areas, ultimately boosting confidence in their ability to conduct meaningful, real-world conversations.

Learn more at

www.RosettaStone.com/Enterprise
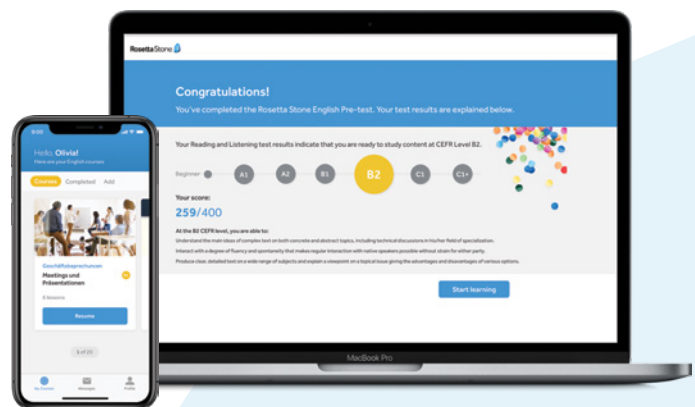
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Why Rosetta Stone® Enterprise?

Rosetta Stone is dedicated to using the power of language and literacy education to change people's lives. Millions of inspired learners have used our online and mobile solutions at home, in the workplace, and in schools around the world. Inspire your learners to develop critical, English-language skills with the world's most trusted language learning software.

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