



What Proficiency Level Do High School Students Achieve?

Report by

Center for Applied Second Language Studies (CASLS), University of Oregon

Updated April 23, 2010

CASLS is a National Foreign Language Resource Center committed to supporting foreign language educators and improving language education. This report, sponsored by the U.S. Department of Education, is part of the Ten Burning Questions series, in which CASLS investigates educators' questions about language teaching and learning.

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What Proficiency Level Do High School Students Achieve?

Question:

What level of foreign language proficiency does the typical student achieve in a high school program?

Answer:

The majority of students studying a foreign language in a traditional high school program reach benchmark level 3 or 4 by end of the fourth year of study, regardless of the language studied. These levels are similar to the ACTFL levels Novice-High and Intermediate-Low.

Research Summary:

For most students in U.S. high schools, proficiency in a second language must be acquired at school, as there is little opportunity to acquire it naturalistically outside of class.

Most previous studies examined students in a limited number of geographical areas. This study uses a database of students enrolled in foreign language classes nationwide to develop a profile of the typical high school language learner. In all, we looked at results from students who were studying Spanish, French, German, Japanese, or Chinese in thirty states across the U.S. We had reading scores for 16,556 students, writing scores for 14,330, and speaking scores for 12,908. (Listening results were not available.)

The tables below show the percentage of students at each benchmark proficiency level for each year in a high school program. The results are shown separately for each of the three skills tested: reading, writing, and speaking. Levels are reported using the CASLS benchmark scale.

High School Students' Foreign Language Proficiency by Years of Study

Reading	Level 1	Level 2	Level 3	Level 4	Level 5+
Year 1	53.1%	30.0%	13.9%	2.6%	0.4%
Year 2	37.2%	38.0%	19.8%	4.1%	1.0%
Year 3	20.5%	34.2%	31.5%	11.1%	2.7%
Year 4	9.4%	23.4%	32.1%	22.6%	12.5%

Writing	Level 1	Level 2	Level 3	Level 4	Level 5+
Year 1	7.1%	17.2%	49.5%	3.9%	0.1%
Year 2	4.0%	15.2%	59.4%	9.7%	0.6%
Year 3	1.9%	6.0%	52.8%	27.2%	2.5%
Year 4	0.7%	3.2%	36.5%	42.6%	13.2%

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Speaking	Level 1	Level 2	Level 3	Level 4	Level 5+
Year 1	6.6%	23.8%	36.7%	3.1%	0.0%
Year 2	5.3%	21.9%	49.3%	5.0%	0.2%
Year 3	2.0%	10.6%	50.7%	11.6%	0.3%
Year 4	0.9%	3.9%	32.9%	24.4%	3.7%

Data Analysis:

Proficiency testing was conducted using the Standards-based Measurement of Proficiency (STAMP) developed by CASLS and administered by Avant Assessment. All components of the test were delivered to students through the Internet. Teachers proctored their students in school computer labs. The results are based on data collected during the 2007-08 and 2008-09 school years.

The data are limited to students who studied a foreign language for one to four years in a full-year program. Students who spoke the language of study at home or who had been in an immersion program were not included. Based on these criteria, a total of 16,556 students of Spanish, French, German, Japanese, and Chinese are included in the analysis. These students studied in language programs in 271 high schools in 136 districts and 30 states.

The reading test component consisted of a series of multiple-choice items delivered using a computer-adaptive algorithm. At the end of the reading test, students provided writing and speaking samples in response to a standard set of prompts. Trained human raters scored the writing and speaking responses. Students' reading, writing, and speaking scores were reported separately as CASLS benchmark levels. Benchmark levels are based on the ACTFL Guidelines. Benchmark levels 1 to 3 correspond approximately to Novice-Low, Novice-Mid, and Novice-High; benchmark levels 4 to 6 correspond approximately to Intermediate-Low, Intermediate-Mid, and Intermediate-High. (This version of the STAMP test does not contain any items at the Advanced level.)

The tables below show the percentage of students at each benchmark level after one to four years of study. The number of students at each level in each year was divided by the total number of students in each year. Since not all of the students were tested in all three skills (reading, speaking, and writing), the total number of students for each language is presented separately for each skill.

a. Reading

Table 2: Number of Students Taking Reading Test					
	Spanish	French	German	Japanese	Chinese
Year 1	2,394	625	48	164	699
Year 2	3,015	992	487	58	256
Year 3	4,596	1,446	238	182	156
Year 4	817	281	48	9	45

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Table 3: Percentage of Students for Spanish Reading					
	Level 1	Level 2	Level 3	Level 4	Level 5+
Year 1	48.9%	32.0%	14.3%	2.2%	0.3%
Year 2	34.8%	38.8%	20.3%	3.4%	0.3%
Year 3	19.9%	35.3%	32.3%	9.8%	1.3%
Year 4	10.2%	24.0%	31.9%	22.5%	9.7%

Table 4: Percentage of Students for French Reading					
	Level 1	Level 2	Level 3	Level 4	Level 5+
Year 1	37.1%	37.1%	20.2%	4.0%	0.2%
Year 2	27.8%	35.8%	23.6%	7.6%	2.6%
Year 3	15.8%	28.6%	31.3%	15.6%	7.1%
Year 4	4.3%	18.1%	33.5%	24.6%	17.1%

Table 5: Percentage of Students for German Reading					
	Level 1	Level 2	Level 3	Level 4	Level 5+
Year 1	56.3%	29.2%	4.2%	4.2%	0.0%
Year 2	51.5%	36.8%	8.4%	1.6%	0.0%
Year 3	34.5%	35.7%	18.5%	8.8%	0.4%
Year 4	29.2%	37.5%	12.5%	12.5%	2.1%

Table 6: Percentage of Students for Japanese Reading					
	Level 1	Level 2	Level 3	Level 4	Level 5+
Year 1	25.0%	47.0%	19.5%	6.7%	0.6%
Year 2	17.2%	63.8%	19.0%	0.0%	0.0%
Year 3	2.7%	35.7%	30.8%	15.4%	0.5%
Year 4	0.0%	11.1%	55.6%	22.2%	11.1%

Table 7: Percentage of Students for Chinese Reading					
	Level 1	Level 2	Level 3	Level 4	Level 5+
Year 1	80.1%	8.3%	4.3%	1.3%	1.1%
Year 2	62.9%	15.6%	12.1%	3.1%	3.9%
Year 3	26.3%	20.5%	16.0%	6.4%	4.5%
Year 4	4.4%	20.0%	24.4%	8.9%	40.0%

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b. Writing

Table 8: Number of Students Taking Writing Test					
	Spanish	French	German	Japanese	Chinese
Year 1	1,817	502	7	157	596
Year 2	2,667	865	404	47	237
Year 3	4,105	1,325	162	147	154
Year 4	786	255	44	9	44

Table 9: Percentage of Students for Spanish Writing					
	Level 1	Level 2	Level 3	Level 4	Level 5+
Year 1	6.2%	20.0%	66.8%	5.4%	0.2%
Year 2	5.1%	16.9%	65.2%	10.9%	0.3%
Year 3	2.6%	6.7%	57.9%	29.8%	2.1%
Year 4	0.9%	4.1%	37.4%	42.7%	14.0%

Table 10: Percentage of Students for French Writing					
	Level 1	Level 2	Level 3	Level 4	Level 5+
Year 1	5.4%	17.9%	72.9%	3.2%	0.0%
Year 2	1.8%	16.6%	67.6%	11.2%	2.1%
Year 3	1.0%	5.0%	58.3%	30.6%	4.8%
Year 4	0.0%	1.2%	31.4%	54.9%	12.5%

Table 11: Percentage of Students for German Writing					
	Level 1	Level 2	Level 3	Level 4	Level 5+
Year 1	0.0%	14.3%	71.4%	14.3%	0.0%
Year 2	4.2%	17.1%	72.0%	6.4%	0.0%
Year 3	0.0%	9.3%	57.4%	32.7%	0.6%
Year 4	0.0%	2.3%	61.4%	36.4%	0.0%

Table 12: Percentage of Students for Japanese Writing					
	Level 1	Level 2	Level 3	Level 4	Level 5+
Year 1	8.3%	30.6%	52.2%	8.3%	0.0%
Year 2	10.6%	21.3%	55.3%	12.8%	0.0%
Year 3	2.0%	5.4%	67.3%	24.5%	0.0%
Year 4	0.0%	11.1%	11.1%	44.4%	33.3%

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Table 13: Percentage of Students for Chinese Writing					
	Level 1	Level 2	Level 3	Level 4	Level 5+
Year 1	20.1%	26.5%	38.3%	3.4%	0.0%
Year 2	4.6%	16.0%	62.4%	13.5%	0.0%
Year 3	1.9%	12.3%	61.7%	18.8%	5.2%
Year 4	2.3%	2.3%	61.4%	11.4%	22.7%

c. *Speaking*

Table 14: Number of Students Taking Speaking Test					
	Spanish	French	German	Japanese	Chinese
Year 1	1,865	501	41	150	489
Year 2	2,482	859	427	58	214
Year 3	3,515	1,098	212	110	104
Year 4	596	120	15	8	44

Table 15: Percentage of Students for Spanish Speaking					
	Level 1	Level 2	Level 3	Level 4	Level 5+
Year 1	9.6%	27.3%	49.7%	3.0%	0.0%
Year 2	7.3%	23.5%	58.0%	5.7%	0.0%
Year 3	3.0%	13.5%	66.2%	13.5%	0.2%
Year 4	1.8%	7.4%	47.3%	37.2%	5.0%

Table 16: Percentage of Students for French Speaking					
	Level 1	Level 2	Level 3	Level 4	Level 5+
Year 1	8.0%	34.7%	52.3%	2.0%	0.0%
Year 2	5.1%	26.5%	57.5%	6.5%	0.8%
Year 3	1.5%	11.0%	65.0%	19.4%	0.7%
Year 4	0.0%	0.8%	57.5%	36.7%	3.3%

Table 17: Percentage of Students for German Speaking					
	Level 1	Level 2	Level 3	Level 4	Level 5+
Year 1	2.4%	46.3%	43.9%	7.3%	0.0%
Year 2	4.0%	34.7%	55.3%	2.6%	0.5%
Year 3	3.3%	23.6%	56.1%	13.7%	0.5%
Year 4	0.0%	0.0%	80.0%	20.0%	0.0%

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Table 18: Percentage of Students for Japanese Speaking					
	Level 1	Level 2	Level 3	Level 4	Level 5+
Year 1	7.3%	32.7%	38.0%	12.0%	0.0%
Year 2	5.2%	20.7%	60.3%	5.2%	0.0%
Year 3	0.9%	6.4%	54.5%	33.6%	1.8%
Year 4	0.0%	12.5%	25.0%	62.5%	0.0%

Table 19: Percentage of Students for Chinese Speaking					
	Level 1	Level 2	Level 3	Level 4	Level 5+
Year 1	4.5%	32.5%	28.8%	6.1%	0.0%
Year 2	0.9%	25.7%	50.0%	11.2%	0.0%
Year 3	0.0%	12.5%	63.5%	19.2%	1.0%
Year 4	0.0%	0.0%	47.7%	29.5%	22.7%