



How Many Hours of Instruction Do Students Need to Reach Intermediate-High Proficiency?

Report by

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

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5290 University of Oregon, Eugene, OR 97403 • 541-346-5699

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Question:

Have many hours of study in high school programs does it take for students to reach the Intermediate-Mid to Intermediate-High proficiency ranges?

Answer:

This is the number one question teachers and administrators ask about foreign language study. It is the right question, because it relates student proficiency outcomes to the amount of instruction hours students have had. Like other areas of study, what you get out depends on what you put in.

Unfortunately, teachers, administrators, and parents often underestimate the amount of time students need when a program is being planned, and they are then disappointed in the students' learning outcomes later. Of course, the number of hours needed to reach a specific proficiency level varies from student to student, but our research shows that only about 15% of students reach a proficiency level near Intermediate-Mid even after approximately 720 hours of study, which is about four years in a typical high school program.

Research Summary:

The Intermediate-Mid to Intermediate-High range on the ACTFL scale is a goal often desired and expected from a four-year high school language program. We looked at the results from the Standards-based Measurement of Proficiency (STAMP), an online proficiency assessment delivered nationally. STAMP has reading, writing, and speaking components. The reading section is multiple choice, and trained raters evaluate students' writing and speaking samples.

Considering how many hours of language instruction students typically receive and compare that to the number of hours devoted to achieving other skills can be useful. In a typical high school program that meets one hour per day five days a week for the entire school year of 36 weeks, students would receive 180 hours of instruction annually. Of course, there are holidays, snow days, teacher in-service days, and so on, so 180 hours is a generous estimate. At best, high school students will have four years of foreign language study for a total of 720 hours.

The maximum of 720 hours of foreign language study can be compared to the thousands of hours students spend learning their first language. Even for other school subjects, such as math and literacy skills, instruction begins in first grade or before and continues each year for all years of schooling. The total number of instructional hours is in the thousands for these subjects.

The question of how long students need to learn another language implies that there is one answer that will apply to every student, which of course isn't true. Some students need longer

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than others for a variety of reasons. Our research shows that after 630 to 720 hours of instruction, or about midway through the fourth year of study, approximately 14% of students can read at the Intermediate-Mid level or better. Approximately 16% can write and 6% can speak at this level.

Student proficiency is a direct result of instructional hours. If high results are desired, then adequate time must be built into the program as the first step. Only after adequate time is allotted can other issues be addressed. Methods and textbooks, for example, are refining issues to be decided after adequate time is scheduled. Of course, even adequate time can be frittered away on activities that do not promote proficiency. If proficiency is the goal, the question for every decision becomes, “How will this improve proficiency?”

Data Analysis:

We selected students in high school Spanish and French programs who took STAMP. The study is limited to these two languages because they are both Romance languages and have large numbers of student results available in the database. We eliminated heritage speakers from the study.

Teachers supplied information about the hours of instruction each week for their classes. We used this information, along with the total number of years of study and the date of the STAMP assessment, to estimate the total number of instructional hours each student had received. We further limited the data to students who had a total number of instructional hours equivalent to being in the last half of the first, second, third, or fourth year of instruction, assuming a typical high school year of 180 hours of instruction.

The final dataset contained reading scores for 7,515 students. Of these, 6,895 had also taken the writing portion of STAMP, and 6,265 had taken the speaking portion. The students were enrolled in 324 classes situated in 117 schools in 56 districts and 21 states. Although this study is based on a convenience sample, it represents a regionally diverse cross section of U.S. high schools.

STAMP results are reported on the benchmark scale, where descriptors for levels ranging from 1 to 6 are based on the descriptors of ACTFL levels Novice-Low to Intermediate-High. Benchmark scores are available for reading, writing, and speaking.

Table 1 shows the percent of students at each benchmark level for each of the four years of study. For example, in the last half of the first year of study, 52.8% of students score at level 1, while 28.4% score at level 2. Following the tables, separate charts for each skill show the distribution of students by proficiency level for each year of language study.

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Table 1. Percent of Students at Each Benchmark Level for Each Year of Study

		Years / Hours of Study			
		Year 1	Year 2	Year 3	Year 4
Skill	Level*	90-180	270-360 hrs	450-540 hrs	630-720 hrs
		hrs			
Reading	NE	3.2	2.0	1.4	2.2
	1	52.8	31.0	11.7	3.1
	2	28.4	39.3	30.8	21.2
	3	12.6	21.7	37.4	32.1
	4	2.5	5.0	14.7	27.5
	5	0.5	1.0	4.0	13.9
Writing	NE	2.2	0.9	0.5	0.0
	1	9.7	3.1	0.6	0.1
	2	24.9	12.9	3.9	1.0
	3	58.2	69.0	57.5	32.6
	4	4.8	13.2	34.1	50.2
	5/6	0.1	1.0	3.4	16.1
Speaking	NE	12.4	5.3	3.2	0.8
	1	15.7	5.2	0.8	0.1
	2	31.8	23.9	9.8	3.3
	3	38.4	59.9	68.4	51.5
	4	1.7	5.7	17.0	38.9
	5/6	0.0	0.1	0.8	5.5

*NE means a benchmark level was not established. The student failed to answer enough reading items correctly or to submit ratable speaking or writing samples. Level 5 includes students who were rated level 6 for writing and speaking.

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Chart 1. Reading - Percent of Students at Each Benchmark Level for Each Year of Study

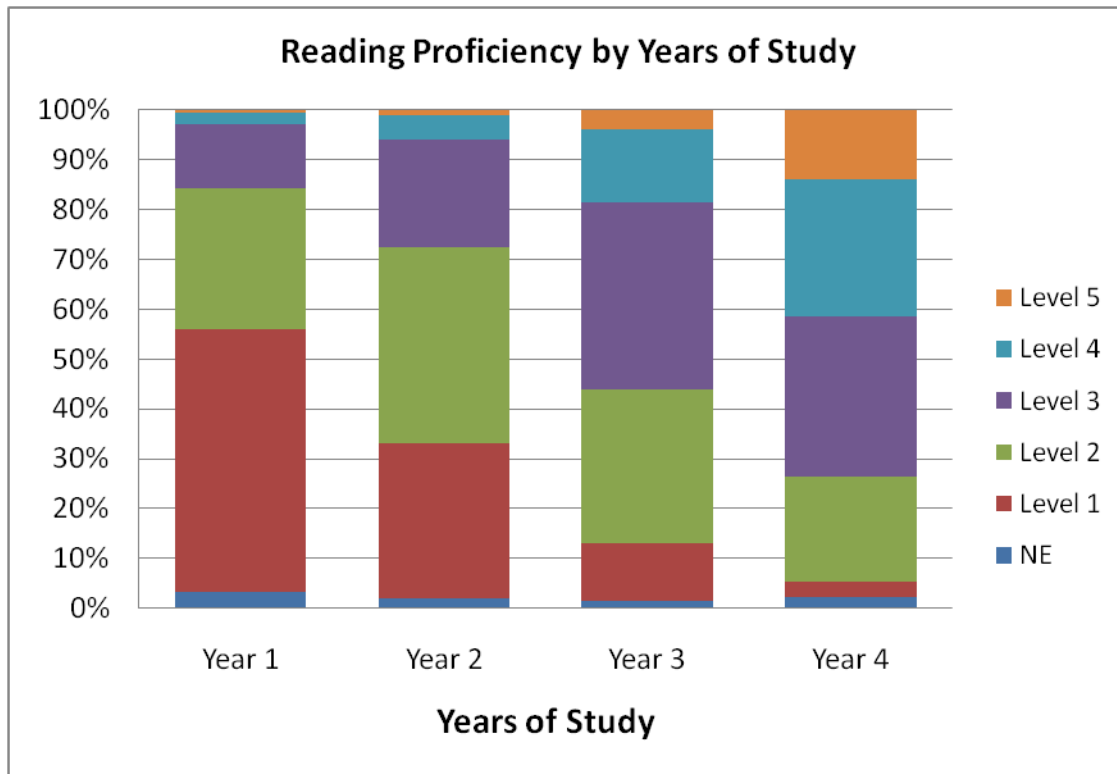


Chart 2. Writing - Percent of Students at Each Benchmark Level for Each Year of Study

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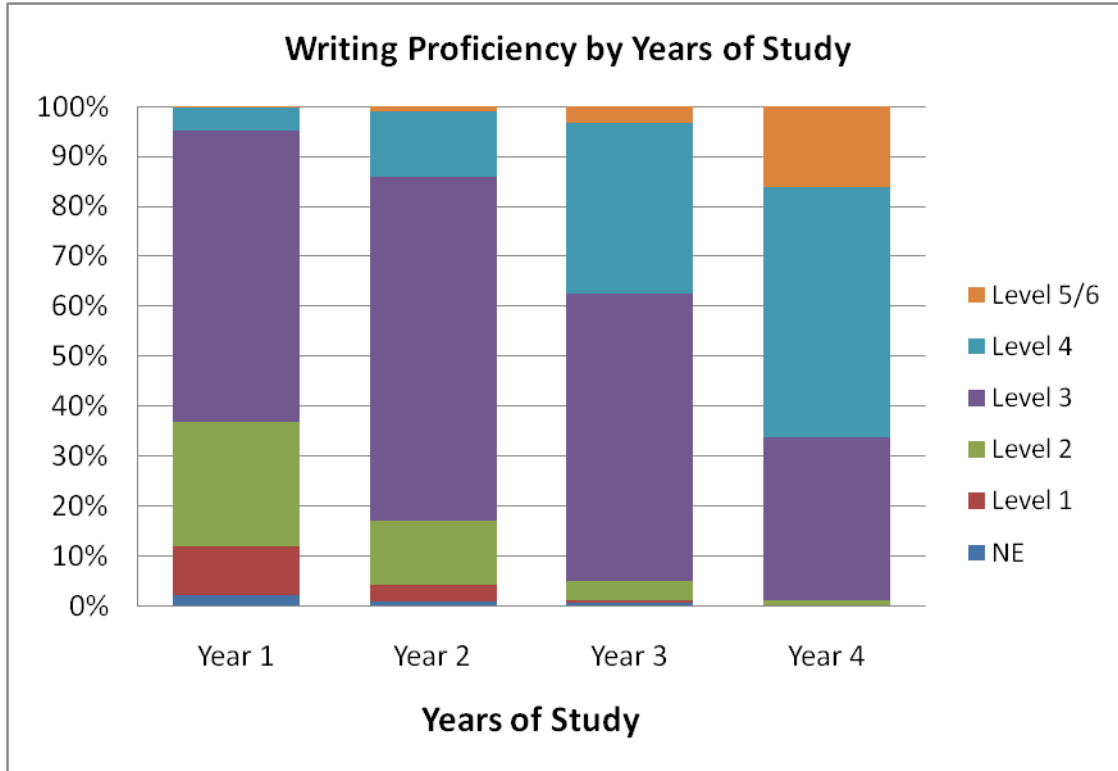
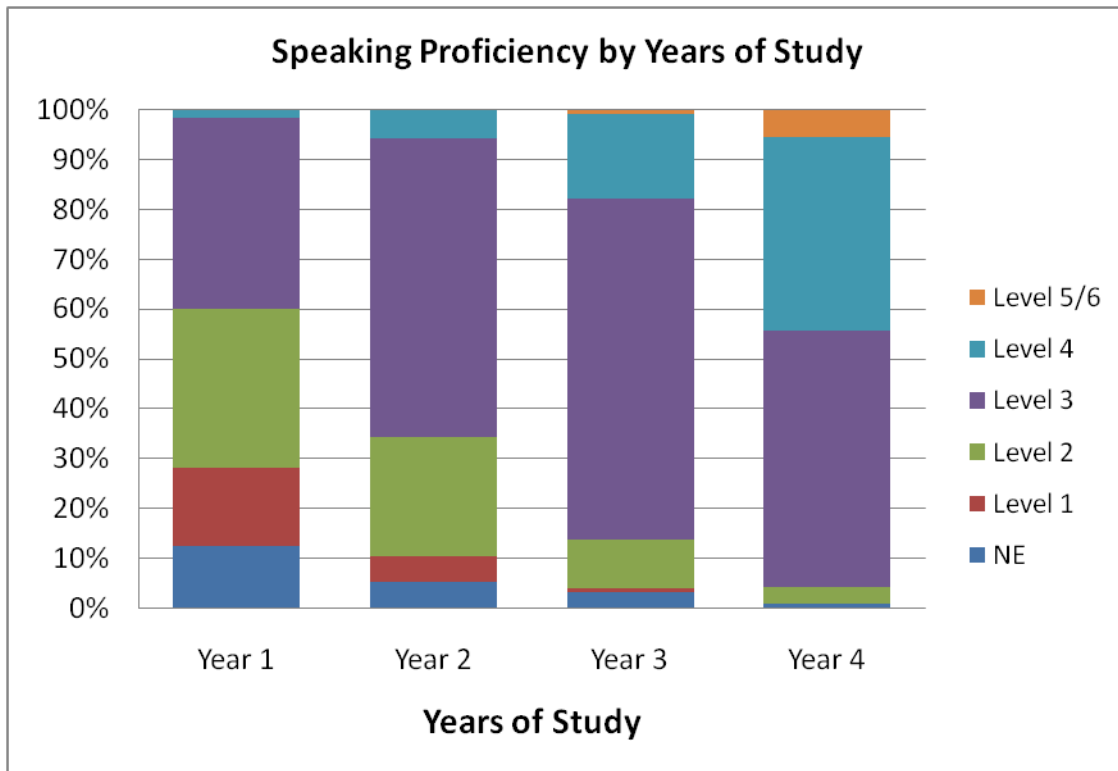


Chart 3. Speaking - Percent of Students at Each Benchmark Level for Each Year of Study



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Implications:

Parents, districts, and teachers usually think of fourth year language classes as “advanced” level. Indeed, good students in these classes can reach Intermediate-Mid or -High, do well on AP or IB exams, and speak with relative ease on everyday topics. About 85% of them, however, do not reach this proficiency level. The majority have only minimal functional proficiency, i.e. the ability to describe things in their immediate environment, order a meal, ask a simple question, or tell a simple story. They are not able to use language for professional purposes, though they may be able to, for example, greet a customer or handle a phone call in another language.

There are many valid reasons for learning multiple languages besides professional advancement. If districts want to give students those professional-level skills, however, they should consider starting programs at the elementary or middle school level and adding higher level high school classes. Institutions of higher education also need to serve these “almost there” students. College classes designed to develop Advanced and Superior level skills can build on the solid Intermediate skills developed by many students and give them true professional proficiency in the language.