



How Do Proficiency Levels Compare Between K-12 and University Students?

Report by

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

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Question:

Recently, I was asked to explain to school board members and parents what defines Spanish I, Spanish II, etc. Why, for example, does a student exiting a sixty-three-week middle school program (grades 6, 7, 8) only receive credit for level I at the high school level? Why isn't it level II or, better yet, level III? Discussions about university requirements go this way: "You need three levels of Spanish to get accepted to Pitt," or "You need four years of a language to get into Carnegie Mellon." How can I relate all this to *proficiency* benchmarks?

Answer:

The ability to make appropriate comparisons between language programs in different schools is critical to developing a well articulated course of study for students moving through their school years. This ability is also important for state and national organizations that seek to ensure equal education for all students. The key question is on what basis should programs be compared?

One traditional approach is to compare the educational *input* the students receive. Input can be measured qualitatively by comparing the content of programs or quantitatively by measuring the hours of instructional time. Neither of these approaches tells us what the students actually learned or how well they can perform a given linguistic task. For that, we need to measure learning *outcomes* using tests tied to a widely accepted proficiency scale.

Although they are not the same, instructional input and learning outcomes are highly correlated. Below CASLS compares proficiency outcomes for students at various points in middle school, high school, and university programs. These results provide an overview of typical outcomes for U.S. foreign language programs.

Research Summary:

Historically, schools developed their own local curricula suited to their students' needs. Over time, and with the emergence of the textbook industry, there has been a de facto standardization of curricula for commonly taught languages (such as Spanish, French, and German) in high school programs across the U.S. Thus, the first year of high school Spanish has much the same content and approximately the same instructional hours across virtually all school districts. Typically, the first year's content is labeled "Spanish I" as a matter of convenience. This standardization of the high school programs has allowed universities to require the successful completion of various amounts of content as a requirement for acceptance.

As school districts developed language programs in middle and elementary schools, comparing the content of these courses with that of the high school courses so the students wouldn't have to repeat material became important. Districts also recognized that younger students might not be

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able to cover material as quickly as high school students, or the middle school program might have fewer instructional hours per year; thus, calendar years were needed equal one high school year of time. Because of the variety of middle school programs, the process of equating these programs with high school ones is done on a district by district basis. Two common approaches are to offer a three-year (grades 6, 7 and 8) or a two-year (grades 7 and 8) middle school program that covers approximately as much material as one high school year.

The historical focus on educational input has ignored what students might actually be learning. One goal is surely that they develop the ability to communicate in the language, although other desirable outcomes include an appreciation of the culture and exposure to the history and literature of the language's native speakers. Measuring proficiency outcomes requires the development of a common proficiency scale so that students can be compared irrespective of how or where they acquired their abilities. In the U.S., the ACTFL scale is widely accepted, and tests based on it are available for a variety of languages. This study presents data on the results of the Standards-based Measurement of Proficiency (STAMP) developed by CASLS.

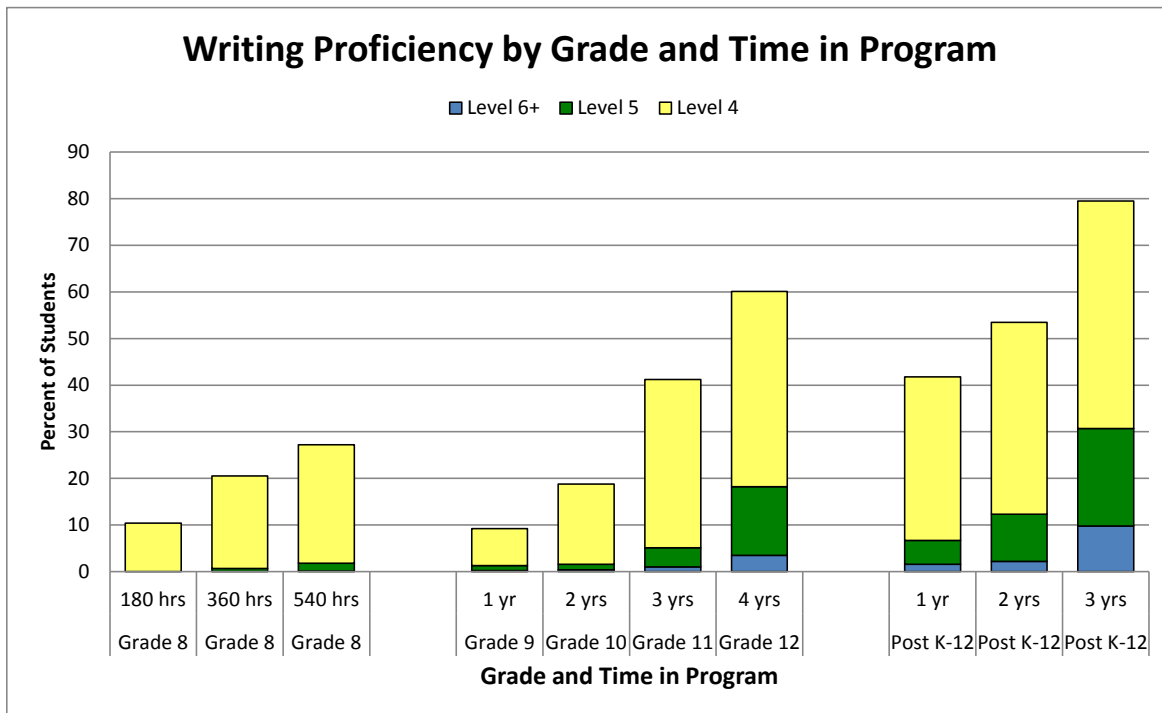
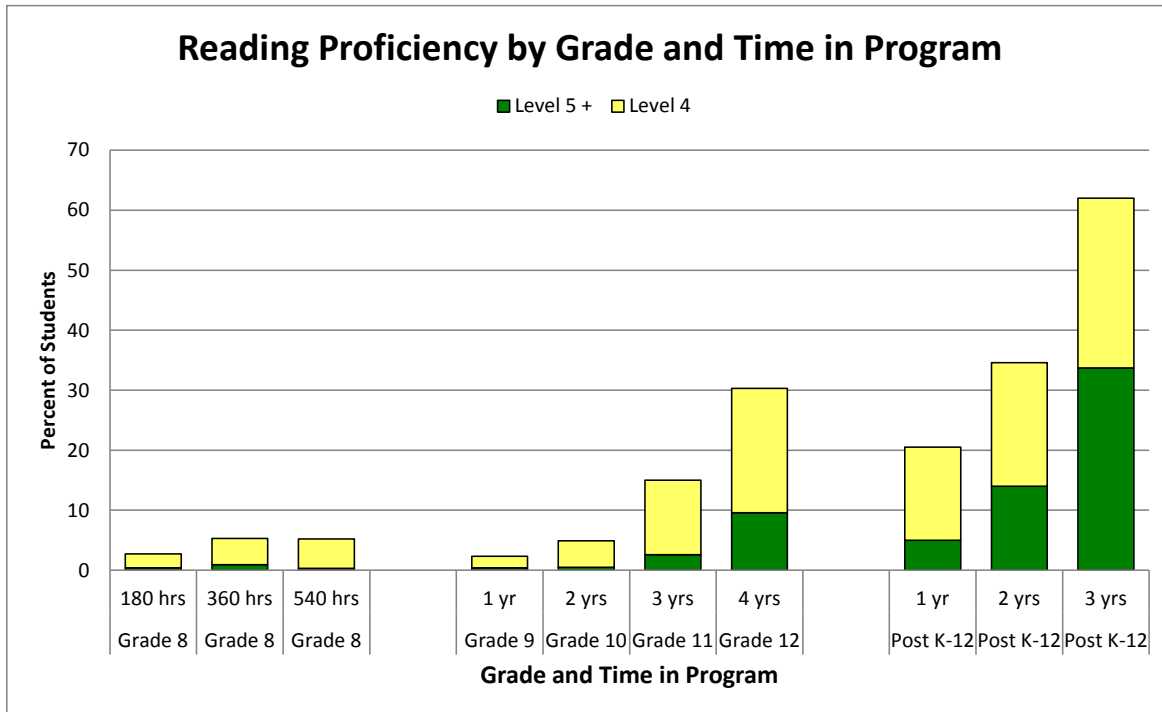
The charts below give an overview of students' proficiency levels at various points in U.S. language programs. For reading, writing, and speaking skills, the percent of students at CASLS benchmark levels 4, 5 and 6 are shown. These levels are in the ACTFL Intermediate range, a range where students are just beginning to be able to communicate effectively in the language. (Note that level 6 is not possible for the STAMP reading assessment.)

The charts illustrate several important points:

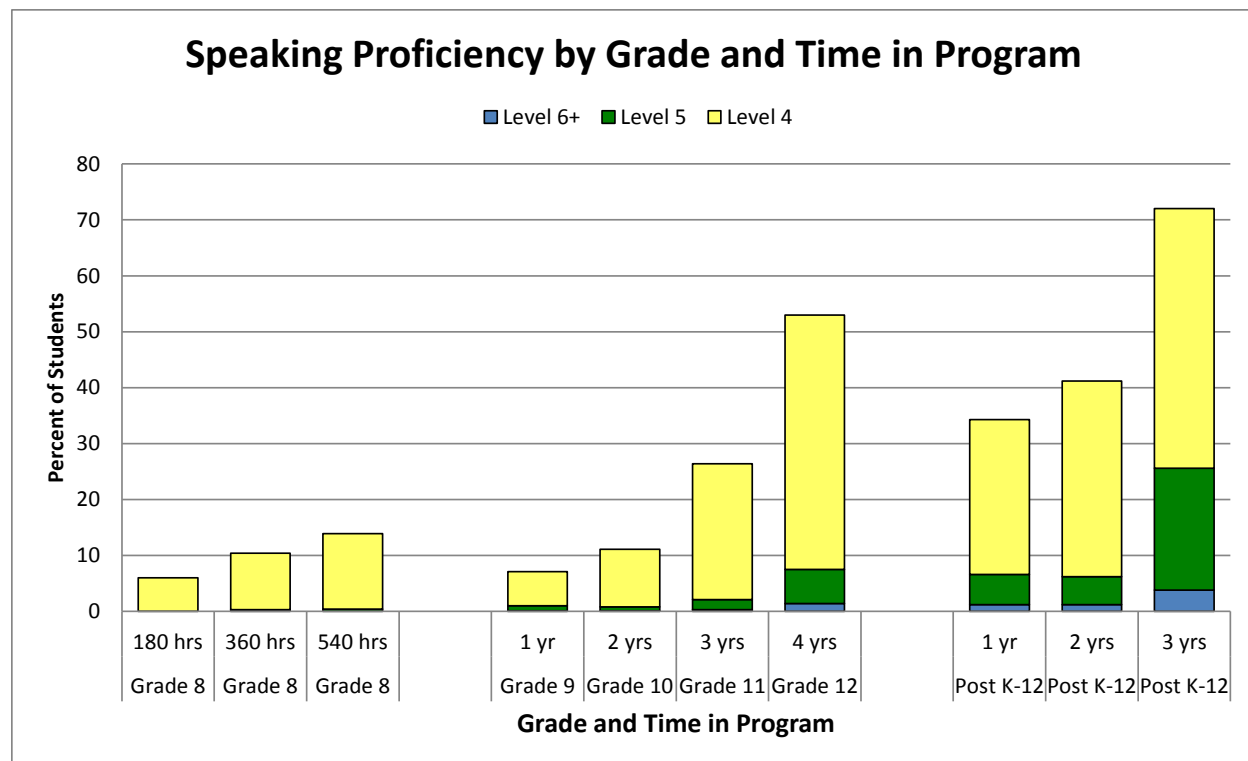
- High school students with three years of study have approximately the same proficiency levels as university students with one year of study.
- Eighth grade students with 540 hours of instruction have had about as much class time as third-year high school students. High school students score consistently higher.
- Students' productive skills are often slightly higher than reading scores.
- Most students in U.S. programs do not reach proficiency levels that allow them to effectively communicate in the language.

A number of other comparisons can be made. Note, however, that high school and university students may perform better because they have had instruction in elementary or middle schools. Also, these students are likely to spend more time studying outside of class than middle school students. In both high school and university, students in third- and fourth-year classes are a self-selected group of those who enjoy learning the language and do well at it. Finally, university students in particular may have had opportunities to study abroad. This overview does not take these factors into account. Rather, it provides an overview of typical proficiency levels in specific language programs.

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Data Analysis:

In terms of proficiency, how do middle school, high school, and university programs compare? To answer this question, CASLS selected students from the STAMP database who were enrolled in a language program in a U.S. middle school, high school, or college/university in 2008, 2009, or 2010 and had taken fewer than two years of immersion instruction, if any. Based on student responses to demographic questions, learners who regularly spoke the language of study at home with family members were not included.

CASLS further restricted the data by selecting specific groups of students based on grade in school and amount of instructional time.

- For middle schools, only eighth grade students were selected, as these students are most comparable cognitively to high school students. Eighth grade students were divided into groups who had had 180, 360, or 540 hours of instruction. Programs in K-8 are highly variable, making instructional hours the best metric for comparison. A program that meets one hour daily all year will have approximately 180 hours of instruction each year. This compares with one year in a typical, full-year high school program.
- For high school programs, the instructional hours are fairly standard for a full-year program at about five hours per week on average. CASLS' selections are designed to show the progress of students who begin in ninth grade and take a language class each

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year. Thus, the groups selected were: ninth grade students with one year of instruction in a regular full-year program, tenth grade students with two years, eleventh grade students with three years, and twelfth grade students with four years.

- Post K-12 programs are also fairly standard in terms of hours of instruction. Insufficient data was available for fourth-year students, so only students with one, two, or three years of instruction were selected.

Although many other combinations of grade and amount of instruction are available, CASLS felt these groups would provide a representative sample of student proficiency in the various programs. All groups selected have several hundred students in at least six different schools. The final dataset contained scores for 11,465 students distributed as follows: 3,352 eighth grade students attending 117 schools in 71 districts and 24 states; 6,615 high school students attending 210 schools in 116 districts and 27 states; and 1,498 college/university students attending 56 schools in 26 states. Thus, although this study is based on a convenience sample, it represents a regionally diverse cross-section of U.S. schools.

All students took the multiple-choice reading assessment; most also took a writing and/or speaking assessment. Trained raters evaluated students' writing and speaking samples. STAMP proficiency scores are reported on the CASLS benchmark scale, where descriptions for levels ranging from 1 to 6 are based on the descriptions of ACTFL levels Novice-Low to Intermediate-High.

The tables below show the percentages of students in each group who scored at each benchmark level.

Table 1. Reading—Students at Each Benchmark Level by Grade and Time in Program

Grade Level	Time in Program	Count	1	2	3	4	5+
8	180 hrs	979	42.3%	35.1%	19.8%	2.3%	0.4%
8	360 hrs	1,217	33.4%	38.9%	22.4%	4.4%	0.9%
8	540 hrs	1,156	42.1%	29.3%	23.3%	4.9%	0.3%
9	1 yr	1,368	61.3%	23.8%	12.6%	1.9%	0.4%
10	2 yrs	2,157	39.9%	33.8%	21.4%	4.4%	0.5%
11	3 yrs	2,509	14.3%	35.9%	34.9%	12.4%	2.6%
12	4 yrs	581	7.2%	22.5%	39.9%	20.7%	9.6%
PostK-12	1 yr	847	20.9%	29.3%	29.4%	15.5%	5.0%
PostK-12	2 yrs	393	10.9%	21.4%	33.1%	20.6%	14.0%
PostK-12	3 yrs	258	1.9%	10.9%	25.2%	28.3%	33.7%

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Table 2. Writing—Students at Each Benchmark Level by Grade and Time in Program

Grade Level	Time in Program	Count	1	2	3	4	5	6+
8	180 hrs	599	3.8%	17.4%	68.4%	10.4%	0.0%	0.0%
8	360 hrs	1,146	2.8%	11.2%	65.5%	19.8%	0.7%	0.0%
8	540 hrs	802	3.0%	10.6%	59.1%	25.4%	1.7%	0.1%
9	1 yr	1,288	10.2%	26.5%	54.1%	7.9%	1.1%	0.2%
10	2 yrs	1,935	4.1%	17.3%	59.8%	17.2%	1.2%	0.4%
11	3 yrs	2,436	0.9%	3.9%	53.9%	36.1%	4.1%	1.0%
12	4 yrs	566	0.2%	2.3%	37.5%	41.9%	14.7%	3.5%
PostK-12	1 yr	769	2.3%	9.9%	46.0%	35.1%	5.1%	1.6%
PostK-12	2 yrs	318	2.5%	7.9%	36.2%	41.2%	10.1%	2.2%
PostK-12	3 yrs	254	0.0%	2.0%	18.5%	48.8%	20.9%	9.8%

Table 3. Speaking—Students at Each Benchmark Level by Grade and Time in Program

Grade Level	Time in Program	Count	1	2	3	4	5	6+
8	180 hrs	796	4.3%	32.8%	56.9%	6.0%	0.0%	0.0%
8	360 hrs	1,133	4.2%	21.1%	64.3%	10.1%	0.3%	0.0%
8	540 hrs	679	8.0%	29.6%	48.5%	13.5%	0.4%	0.0%
9	1 yr	1,056	13.9%	36.9%	42.1%	6.1%	0.9%	0.1%
10	2 yrs	1,824	8.3%	30.3%	50.3%	10.3%	0.7%	0.1%
11	3 yrs	2,126	1.2%	11.1%	61.3%	24.3%	1.8%	0.3%
12	4 yrs	345	0.6%	2.3%	44.1%	45.5%	6.1%	1.4%
PostK-12	1 yr	595	1.5%	16.1%	48.1%	27.7%	5.4%	1.2%
PostK-12	2 yrs	260	0.4%	6.5%	51.9%	35.0%	5.0%	1.2%
PostK-12	3 yrs	211	0.0%	0.5%	27.5%	46.4%	21.8%	3.8%