

Proficiency Testing and Language Teaching: Russian and Polish

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Abstract

This paper explores the potential application of proficiency testing in U.S. colleges and universities. Specific consideration is given to: the Oral Proficiency Interview, based on ILR or ACTFL guidelines, administered on a large scale at the Defense Language Institute and occasionally employed in American academia; the Diagnostic Assessment Interview, the assessment tool of choice at DLI, basically unheard of in academia; and the new Polish proficiency test, which is part and parcel of the standardized series of language tests administered throughout Europe, based on Language Testers of Europe guidelines. The author proposes that introducing the underlying principles of proficiency testing into American academia and promoting a better awareness of level tasks and expectations on the part of language teachers could help to eliminate the disconnect between testing and teaching. It could benefit instruction from early to advanced stages.

Introduction

The concept of “teaching for proficiency” is by no means new – it has been around, in different guises, under different names, for decades.¹ As Alice Omaggio Handley aptly remarks, nobody anywhere ever strove to teach for incompetency.² Perhaps no one

¹ One important publication on the topic of teaching for proficiency dates back to 1985. Its title reflects the concern of the present article, *Teaching for Proficiency, the Organizing Principle*, ed. Theodore V. Higgs.

² The ground-breaking book by Alice Omaggio Hadley, *Teaching Language in Context* (Heinle & Heinle, 1993), which this article will repeatedly refer to, provides a thorough overview of teaching foreign language for proficiency, including relevant research findings and historical background.

would argue today against the advantages of teaching a foreign language “for proficiency.” Yet the impetus for this article is the belief of its author in the pressing and urgent need to educate educators on the principles and systems of proficiency testing in order to make the teaching and learning process more effective.

The idea for this article was inspired by the anxiety mixed with curiosity I felt when I had to “walk in the shoes” of my students and take language proficiency exams myself: the Oral Proficiency Interview (OPI) in English and in Russian were required to work at the Defense Language Institute (DLI). This idea began nagging me again when I ended up on the other side of the testing barricades while working at DLI and was trained to administer two kinds of language proficiency assessment tools – OPIs and Diagnostic Assessment Interviews (DAI). When I faced a language proficiency exam in a completely different, European system (a Language Proficiency Test in Polish, which I took in the summer of 2007 in order to establish my level of proficiency in this language but also with the purpose of familiarizing myself with a different approach to proficiency testing), the need to order and share my thoughts about the value of applying proficiency standards and associated pedagogic principles became urgent. My interest lay in the implications of proficiency testing for language teaching.

The four language skills that are taught and tested in the States (both in academia and in government educational institutions and agencies) are speaking, reading, listening, and writing. The Oral Proficiency Interview, which is designed to test only one skill, speaking, is the one most frequently used language skill assessment test in America. It is given to every graduating linguist at DLI, yet rarely applied in academia, especially within smaller language programs that lack trained testers. Reading and listening proficiency tests are also routinely administered in government language institutions, yet are practically never offered in academia. The writing component of language proficiency quite understandably (given how labor intensive it is for the testers) is used on a very limited scale in government agencies and is never applied in academia.

In the classroom I have often encountered two reactions to proficiency standards at opposite ends of the spectrum. On the one hand, I often witness a complete lack of awareness on the part of

students and their instructors of the ideas behind proficiency testing practices, which led me to view the proficiency tests as unfair. At the other end of the spectrum was an excessive awareness and preoccupation with the outcomes of the tests on the part of both learners and their instructors (resulting in the unfortunate practice of “teaching to the test”), something that clearly diminishes their value. While observing the impressive results achieved by language learners at the Defense Language Institute – results bolstered by adequate language instruction hours, the general orientation of the teaching process towards specific proficiency results, and in many cases even monetary incentives – I kept wondering about practical ways this valuable tool, language proficiency testing, could be brought into the university classroom and thought about the considerable positive impact such a practice might have on the preparedness of its language learners.

This paper will examine various kinds of language proficiency assessment tools, from least to most comprehensive. Indeed, while the Oral Proficiency Interview evaluates proficiency in one skill, speaking, the integrated proficiency test of Polish deals with five areas crucial to language mastery – four usually recognized skills and grammar competency. My proposition is that the ideas, level definitions and tasks from these tests can and should be applied to language teaching from its earliest stages and that certain aspects of the European testing system have the potential to enrich our approach to both proficiency testing and teaching.

The Oral Proficiency Interview

Perhaps the following “modesty topos” would have been better at the start of this article, but here it is, better late than never. In the interest of full disclosure I should state that with a Ph.D. in literature (Slavic languages and literatures, to be exact), I am not a specialist in pedagogy. However, despite the fact that my primary research interests lie elsewhere, I, like many of my colleagues, have spent as much time (or probably more) on foreign language instruction as I have teaching literature and culture. Concern for future generations of language learners moved me to address the subject of language testing and teaching.

On the positive side of the ledger, I have had the opportunity to be trained as a language proficiency tester and to apply this knowledge and training to testing language learners with a wide range of abilities and skills. Additionally I bring to the table teaching experience of more than a dozen years, in a variety of settings, both in academia, and in military language schools. These two areas of my background, teaching and testing, inevitably led me to consider the interconnectedness and possible advantageous contribution that proficiency testing could bring into language teaching. I will briefly describe the Oral Proficiency Interview and follow it with practical recommendations for appropriating elements of this tool for teaching in academia.

Both ACTFL (American Council of Teachers of Foreign Languages) and ILR (Interagency Language Roundtable) provide specific definitions of each level of language proficiency in terms of what a student CAN and CANNOT do at this level (See Appendix A). This translates into specific language tasks at each level. Since in an American college language program the best result that could be attained over four years of study is level two (and even this level usually presumes previous language study in a high school and a college that is fortunate enough to have four years of language instruction and/or a study abroad program), I will focus on the tasks that can be performed between levels zero and two, as levels 0+, 1, and 2 are most relevant to undergraduate language programs. For OPI purposes level is defined in terms of the content and tasks characteristically handled at this level by the language learner.

LEVEL 0+ (memorized proficiency) (See Appendix B).
Content: ten subject areas: basic objects, date, time, days of the week, basic colors, family, weather, clothing, months and year. Two Tasks: simple short conversation between the examiner and examinee and enumeration questions of the examiner to the examinee within the above-mentioned subject areas.

LEVEL 1 (elementary proficiency). Content: minimum courtesy requirements, simple biographical information, everyday survival topics. Three Tasks: simple short conversation, examinee asks questions of the examiner and playacts one basic survival situation.

LEVEL 2 (limited working proficiency). Content: concrete topics, background, everyday activities, work. Seven Tasks: narration in past, present and future; physical description (person, place, thing); instructions or directions; reporting facts about current events; survival situation with a complication.

Familiarity on the part of language teachers in academia with the proficiency testing systems, the definitions of levels and particularly with the characteristic tasks for each level, even just in speaking, could greatly improve the effectiveness of the teaching process and the results achieved by the language learners. One can crudely approximate that upon completing the first year in a university language program, a learner would normally attain the Novice High (0+ ILR) level of proficiency in Russian; after the second year of instruction – Intermediate Low/Mid (1 ILR); and after the third year – Intermediate High (1+ ILR).³ It is rare that a student straight out of an American university language program would attain an “Advanced” level of proficiency (2 and beyond on ILR scale) without a study abroad program, since often there are not four, but only three years of instruction in Russian language even for the majors.

Given this reality, the knowledge of the content areas and tasks appropriate to each level of language learning may become a crucial tool in improving the effectiveness of a given language program. While the textbook authors are predominantly aware of these stages of language development, the language instructor’s thorough familiarity with these levels would be an additional and crucial element able to improve the effectiveness of a college language program dramatically. Normally, the sequence for the first and second year of instruction is set up and the University language instructor has no say

³ Thus, one popular second-year Russian textbook, *Russian Stage Two* (by Cynthia L. Martin and Andrei E. Zaitsev, 1993, 2001, ACTR), emphasizes its goal as to help the learner attain “a solid Intermediate Mid level of oral proficiency.” (*Russian Stage Two*, p.v). A conversation textbook for the third-year Russian language course, *Cinema for Russian Conversation* (by Mara Kashper, Olga Kagan, Yuliya Morozova, 2005, Focus Publishing), states that the textbook may be employed for students with a range of proficiency levels, “from Intermediate to Advanced Plus proficiency according to the ACTFL guidelines.” Moreover, its exercises are distributed for three specific levels: Intermediate-Low, Intermediate and Advanced level (which may also be used for heritage speakers).

in the choice of low-level teaching materials, so s/he usually relies on textbooks adopted by his/her program. Yet awareness on the part of this instructor of the appropriate language tasks would make the whole learning and teaching process all the more effective and the choice of the third-year-level and beyond textbooks as well as their supplementation and tailoring all the more insightful.

Indeed, in the first and second year of instruction, students familiarize themselves with the alphabet, writing system and basic grammar of Russian as well as with basic lexical themes systematically introduced by the textbooks. Yet if, on top of it, the language instructor would strive to practice simple survival situations (See Appendix C), encourage the learners to formulate their own questions, and would regularly engage in simple short conversations with them, they would be much more prepared to use the language functionally and to be able to communicate with native speakers which is usually the ultimate purpose of their language study.

At the intermediate level within the regular college language program or the third year of instruction, and at the advanced or fourth-year level (if such a course exists in the given program in the given language,) the language teacher faces an impressive variety of materials to choose from, many of them focusing on one skill or one area of knowledge. There are textbooks designed to develop conversation (with content material ranging from cinema to Russian history), grammar (through literary texts or featuring other approaches), reading, and/or writing. At this point it is difficult to make an informed choice. I suggest that keeping the development of the student's language proficiency in mind, making it the cornerstone of the integrated curriculum and textbooks choices, is the only approach which may hopefully provide coherency and efficiency to a University language program.

The Diagnostic Assessment Interview⁴

The Diagnostic Assessment Interview, as it is used at the DLI, is not a “test,” since it does not yield a numerical grade. Rather, it is a learning tool. It evaluates strengths and weaknesses of a learner in a few language skills and, what is even more important, provides him or her with an individualized learning plan based on this assessment empowering him or her to achieve the next level of proficiency in each skill, and in a most efficient and enjoyable way (since one of the elements taken into consideration is the individual students’ learning style) (See Appendix D).

A definition of the term itself would be a logical place to open the discussion: “A Diagnostic Assessment is a unique tool that enables assessors to identify problem areas in all four skills of a foreign language: reading, speaking, listening, and writing.”⁵ Two comments must be made here. First, while in theory a Diagnostic Assessment Interview may incorporate the writing component, for a variety of reasons this part of the interview was usually omitted in the interviews at DLI at 2004–2006 when the author of the present article worked as a Russian Diagnostic Assessor. The most obvious reasons are: less attention to training of the learners in writing in their language program, a limited need for a writing component in their post-graduation work, and most importantly, the particularly labor-intensive nature of the writing portion of the test for the testers, and difficulty to keep this evaluation objective. Thus, usually three skills were evaluated in the course of a Diagnostic Assessment Interview – speaking, reading and listening. And secondly, the Diagnostic Assessment not only allows the assessors to “identify problem areas,”

⁴ Two publications by Ms. Bella Cohen, my primary trainer as a Russian Diagnostic Assessment Specialist at DLI, outline the principles and applications of this pioneering tool in language assessment and teaching in an organized and insightful manner: Bella Cohen, *Diagnostic Assessment: A Unique Tool for Combining Successful Foreign-Language Teaching and Testing in the (Near) Future*, ACTR Newsletter, Volume 29, Number 3, Spring 2003; Bella Cohen, *Diagnostic Assessment at the Superior-Distinguished Threshold*, Salinas: MSI Press, 2003.

⁵ Bella Cohen, *Diagnostic Assessment at the Superior-Distinguished Threshold*, Salinas: MSI Press, 2003, p. 5.

but also to understand the reasons for these deficiencies and to suggest specific activities and exercises to overcome them.

When a language learner comes for a Diagnostic Assessment Interview, which lasts one and a half hours (three parts, half an hour per skill) s/he is interviewed by two assessors, who use a previously developed packet of materials for reading and listening. While speaking is similar to the OPI in its major features, reading and listening are evaluated with the help of the diagnostic packet, which contains several authentic texts for each proficiency level, in a wide range of topics and content areas. Speaking is the first section of the interview, and during a pause that follows it the two assessors (in the absence of the student) confer on the approximate proficiency level of the interviewee and agree on the subsequent course of action. The assessors now see the interviewee's approximate proficiency level in speaking. Experience shows that a student's proficiency in reading and listening usually does not deviate from that in speaking by more than half a level (for example, speaking on level 2 and reading on level 1+), though sometimes there are greater differences (for example 2 in speaking and 1 in listening).

Therefore, when the interviewee returns, the assessors give him or her two or three authentic passages at this estimated proficiency level and when he/she is done reading the first text, pose a number of questions to establish the degree of his/her reading comprehension. The questions are tailored to the level of the text, so that on level two they would focus on the concrete facts and concrete information, on level three – on abstract ideas, on level four – on the uniqueness of the text itself and on the allusions to phenomena outside of the text, as well as ideas implied between the lines. In the course of the reading section of the interview, if the student is able to read either better or worse than expected, by offering additional text(s) at the appropriate level, the assessors are able to fine-tune their predictions and to assess the actual proficiency level in reading. The listening section follows the reading one and is similarly structured.

Following the diagnostic assessment interview the two assessors provide the language learner with two individualized documents – the Learner's Profile and the Learning Plan. The former outlines strengths and weaknesses of an individual learner in each skill, thus

allowing him/her to focus on the areas of weaknesses and to reach the next proficiency level sooner. The individualized learning plan is a remarkable document – out of a wide repertoire of tasks and activities, appropriate for both class application and individual study, the assessors choose and suggest such tasks and activities that would ensure the necessary practice and development of those specific areas of weaknesses the individual language learner would most benefit from. For example, an advanced language speaker who lacks a cultural background will be advised to work on expanding his/her cultural literacy and be referred to books, dictionaries, Internet sites, and/or Russian TV programs well-suited to remediating the specific deficiency. When a low-level listener has a weakness decoding longer chunks of utterances, and separating overall meaning from incidental details, he/she will be advised where to find materials to practice this skill and instructed in how to approach them.

What are the implications for teaching the Diagnostic Assessment Interview in Russian? Two crucial principles which lay at the basis of collecting materials for the diagnostic packet, authenticity and text typology, may be, at the same time, an invaluable resource for language teaching. Authentic materials are, unfortunately, seldom used in academic language programs, both in reading and listening, yet the problems with authentic texts tend to differ in each of these skills. In order to find and make use in the classroom of authentic reading materials, the instructor should be familiar with text typology, which is not taught except for rare occasions of tester training in DLI.

Understanding text typology, that is, the range of the features which make a text more or less complex, should be an indispensable part of the background of any foreign language instructor (See Appendices E and F). This comprehension of text typology is particularly crucial in a language like Russian.⁶ While in a language of the first group (French and Spanish, closest to English) the learner may often rely on cognates and similar rhetorical structure, as well as the familiar alphabet, in order to figure out the message and implications of an authentic text, in Russian the reader has to have more years of training and more practice with authentic texts in order to successfully interpret the content and message of it.

Authentic listening texts are even more seldom introduced to a university language classroom, and quite understandably so, since overburdened language instructors do not have the time and energy to invest in searching for and collecting authentic listening passages. It is wise to rely on the good textbooks, and while the common belief that “there is no perfect textbook” may be true, it is also true that by supplementing and tailoring a good textbook the language instructor can make the course most efficient and rewarding both for him/herself and for the students. The only thing that is required for such an informed choice of a textbook as well as for the focused supplementation and tailoring of the textbook is the familiarity of the language instructor with the underlying principles of texts typology and the crucial features one has to consider to evaluate a text, whether written or spoken.

⁶ I emphasize that Russian “particularly” needs this distinction based on the categorization of the relative complexity of foreign languages for English-native students of Russian. Out of the four categories of complexity Russian belongs to the third, that is, it is more removed from English and more difficult for such a learner than French or Spanish (group I) and German (group II). Only the languages of group IV are more complex than Russian for the English-native speaker – Arabic, Chinese, Japanese and Korean. (Defense Language Institute online materials / The School of Russian and Asian Studies, “Advocacy and Statistics for Russian Programs”; Alice Omaggio Hadley, *Teaching Language in Context*, p. 28)

European Proficiency Testing⁷

While the field of language proficiency testing in the States constitutes a rich depository of ideas for improving language teaching in American academia, the principles and peculiarities of proficiency testing in Europe may provide additional, surprising, and instructive, revelations for a language instructor.

In the summer of 2007 I had an opportunity to encounter the new Polish proficiency exam in action – not only did I take this test but I also attended a preparatory course for it within the Summer Polish Language and Culture Program run by the Jagellonian University in Krakow. This proficiency exam is a relatively new (and quickly developing) phenomenon in Poland. It was “born” in 2003 by a directive contained in the state law and expanded upon by the Polish Minister of State Education and Sports. This document established an organ responsible for conducting and evaluating proficiency exams in the Polish language on a national scale, overseen by a specially created State Commission of Evaluating Proficiency in Polish as a Foreign Language. The first state-wide exams in Polish were first conducted in 2004. The certificates awarded upon successful completion of the exam to both foreigners and Poles wishing to evaluate their language proficiency are gradually becoming documents required in certain situations within Poland, such as to establish the language level of Polish heritage speakers who previously lived abroad and wish to continue their education in Polish colleges.

One of the main reasons for creating this proficiency exam in Polish was the joining of the European Union by Poland in 2004. One of the goals of establishing these exams in Poland was to join the system of language proficiency testing within the European Union (See Appendix G).

While in their crucial features Polish proficiency tests parallel systems for evaluating language proficiency used in the States, they

⁷ One prominent book on the theory and practice of proficiency teaching in testing in Europe is *Common European Framework of Reference for Language: Learning, Teaching, Assessment* (Cambridge University Press, 2001). Besides other valuable information on various relevant topics, it provides descriptions of proficiency levels and summarizes their most pertinent features (see pp. 24, 251).

have significantly different elements, namely: skills tested, the integrated approach to evaluating proficiency levels, and a self-evaluation component on the part of the tested language student.

In the U.S., grammar competence is not viewed as a skill to be measured since it is the basis underlying all of the above-mentioned four skills and there is the assumption that it will “come through” in each of the four tests. Yet the first surprising feature of the Polish proficiency exam (and apparently the proficiency in other European languages as set forth by the Association of Language Testers in Europe) is that grammar constitutes the fifth part of the proficiency exam, alongside the traditionally recognized four language skills – reading, writing, speaking, and listening. The ambiguous relationship to grammar in the American educational system may be due to the latest (and lasting) sway of focus towards communicative competency where the learners are supposed to “pick up” grammar on their own, without an explicit study of it. Our European colleagues apparently approach this crucial language feature quite differently – “head on.”

The grammar section of the Polish proficiency exam consists of a number of exercises of various types (“fill-in-the-blank,” “multiple choice,” rephrasing – all contextualized, set within a given text) which allow the tester to evaluate the examinee’s grammar knowledge in a relatively time-efficient way and quite accurately (See Appendix H). This unexpected addition to a language proficiency test appears to be more sensible than the “shying away” from grammar which for a number of reasons reigns in American testing practice. Everybody agrees that grammar is the basis of using the language and one cannot achieve even an intermediate level of proficiency without it; so why not learn from our European colleagues and incorporate testing grammatical knowledge into the batteries of tests that measure language proficiency?

Another surprising feature of the Polish proficiency exam is its integrated approach to language testing. This integrated approach is based on the underlying belief that while a learner may have slightly varying levels of proficiency in each specific language skill, for practical purposes (like studying at a Polish University) a certain minimal level in all of them should be expected and required in certain situations. This holistic approach to language is completely opposite of

the widespread American belief that “There is no such thing as across-the board proficiency in a particular language. Learners usually have different levels of proficiency in the four skills. Consequently, the four skills cannot be assessed by one test. Each one requires an independent evaluation.”⁸

In the Polish proficiency test, on the contrary, the examinee has to earn at least 60% of the points on each of the five sections of the exam in order to successfully pass the exam on the given level. Depending upon the actual result earned in each section one of five grades will be assigned – from “unsatisfactory” to excellent” (the results in between are termed ‘satisfactory,’ “good” and “very good”.) Practically, each section of the five can earn up to 40 points out of the total 200 points possible on the exam. The minimum result is thus 24 points in each section. If the examinee earns 23 points or less in only one of the sections, s/he fails the exam and may retake it in a year.

While it is a fact that various language skills of a language learner are mostly on various levels of proficiency, the practical side of such an integrated approach to evaluating it has major practical advantages. Think of a heritage speaker who can speak fluently yet cannot write and read (or masters these skills minimally) in his native language, - s/he may be said to possess a high level of oral proficiency, but no proficiency in reading or writing. An integrated approach to language testing would clearly confirm both for the person in question and for the educational institution s/he is interested in (the true situation and the obstacles in obtaining certain rights or a certain job). In fact, an integrated test may reveal the necessity of a focused development of specific skills and even the nature of tasks one has to practice to achieve at least a minimal balanced proficiency level.

And finally, the most perplexing feature of the Polish proficiency exam is its self-evaluation component. As can be seen from Appendix G, Poland has developed and employs, at this point, proficiency exams at three levels – basic, intermediate and advanced. The

⁸ National Virtual Translation Center site:

www.nvtc.gov/lotw/months/november/learningExpectations.html. This organization is the United States government agency created in 2003 for the purpose of providing translation services for defense and intelligence and run by the FBI.

English exam from the U.K., which in many ways continues to stay the model for test design and administration for tests in other European languages, distinguishes five levels of proficiency. Polish testing specialists might eventually develop, if prompted by the necessity and supported by the legislation, the remaining two levels. Yet at the moment the above mentioned three levels of proficiency exist. Because of the integrated nature of this test, the student is the one who chooses the basic, intermediate, or advanced level. Thus the test will either support or refute the student's self-assessment prior to the test. This may appear to be the most questionable and unfortunate feature of the test. Yet given the right information about the levels and the possibility of taking a preparatory course for this exam, a student should be able to make a rather accurate self-assessment. After all, at this point there are only three levels to choose from. A student who believes that he/she does not qualify as an advanced user (which is comparable to an educated native speaker), but who has invested more time and effort into language study than a beginner, normally evaluates correctly his/her level as intermediate and may proceed with the preparation for the tasks specific for this level in each of the skills and tested areas (grammar cannot be defined as a skill, but rather an area of knowledge).

Self-assessment on the part of the language learner, the one feature of the Polish proficiency exam which appears to be the most shocking and unjustified to a tester/teacher from the States, should be approached with two considerations in mind. First of all, because of the nature and scope of the exam, it would be impossible to offer each student an exam containing tasks from all the three levels, and in all the five skills/areas, in order to establish the proficiency level, as is done in the States, when an exam in one language skill is administered at one time (Diagnostic Assessment Interviews are an exception to this rule, see the section of this article on DAIs). Secondly, and most importantly, this structure places the responsibility for the preliminary establishing of the proficiency level on the learner's own shoulders. Awareness of the proficiency levels and tasks appropriate for each level can only benefit everybody involved in language teaching and learning. The European testing system promotes such an awareness in the language learners themselves.

I strongly believe that such an awareness and a deep understanding of proficiency levels and tasks should indeed become a part of the educational process – it should begin with language instructors trained in proficiency testing and trickle down to their students in order to make them more informed and more independent language learners.

Implications of Proficiency Testing for Language Teaching

As we know, the situation with foreign languages teaching in American universities is generally unsatisfactory. It seems like experts from many areas have agreed that “too little too late” is done to provide foreign language instruction to American undergraduates. Unfortunately, the state of the less commonly taught languages is even more discouraging: academic language programs suffer financial shortages, neglect on the part of the administration and often lack of interest on the part of the students. Even the thriving language programs usually offer an amount of contact hours way below that which would be adequate for attaining higher levels of proficiency. Under the circumstances a proposal “to spread the word” about proficiency levels, standards and testing, both American and European, and a suggestion to introduce these concepts into language teaching may seem to be a call for larger investment in the field and viewed as pure “manilovshchina,” idle daydreaming. And yet, having observed the impressive results achieved by language-learners at the Defense Language Institute I became an enthusiastic advocate of grounding language teaching in proficiency orientation (which can compensate for the insufficient amount of contact hours offered to a university student by making teaching and learning more efficient.)

Familiarization of language teachers with proficiency levels as well as with specific language tasks at each level need not require any considerable financial investments on the part of colleges or administrators. Yet a more focused orientation in language learning could render our students an invaluable service, providing them with functional tools for not only exchanging words but for truly interacting with the native speakers of the target culture and country. If such communication is the final goal of language teaching, it should be all the more supported in an attempt to facilitate intercultural under-

standing between representatives of cultures so vastly different from one another – our American undergraduates and those mysterious contemporary Russian native speakers.

What is sorely needed is training for language instructors in the systems of language proficiency testing – be it ILR or ACTFL, American or European, and in the ideal case, all of the above. Language proficiency testing systems should provide the backbone of “teaching for proficiency” as they ensure the focus on language function and authenticity, thus incorporating the crucial component of the target-language-country culture into the equation. Only then can a college language course designed with a specific goal in mind, a goal defined in terms of proficiency, provide our students with practical tools for communicating in the target country with the speakers of that culture. Proficiency-testing training has had a dramatic impact on the way I teach language, making me a passionate advocate for proficiency orientation for the sake of our students. Let us equip them with real tools for the real world! Let them write New Year's postcards and announcements about a lost dog as their writing tasks; let them practice complain to the *militsia* about a lost purse; let them listen to sample incomprehensible airport announcements to prepare them for the real ones; and let them find new meaning in language study through a new orientation towards proficiency. Amen!

APPENDIX A

Two sets of proficiency evaluation systems used in USA: ACTFL (American Council of Teachers of Foreign Languages) and ILR (Interagency Language Roundtable)⁹

ACTFL proficiency levels	ILR proficiency levels	Proficiency
Superior	5	Native or bilingual proficiency / Functionally native proficiency
	4+	Advanced professional proficiency, plus
	4	Distinguished proficiency / Advanced professional proficiency
	3+	General professional proficiency, plus
	3	Professional working proficiency / General professional proficiency
Advanced High	2+	Limited working proficiency, plus
Advanced Mid	2	Limited working proficiency
Advanced Low		
Intermediate High	1+	Elementary proficiency, plus

⁹ Adapted from Alice Omaggio Hadley, *Teaching Language in Context*, p. 12 and online materials of the National Virtual Translation Center.

Intermediate Mid	1	Survival proficiency / Elementary proficiency
Intermediate Low		
Novice High	0+	Memorized proficiency
Novice Mid	0	No proficiency
Novice Low		

APPENDIX BOPI: Skills, Text Types, Content Areas and Tasks.¹⁰

Tasks by Proficiency Level	Text Type & Content Areas	CAN DO (skills)
LEVEL 5 Information Pass Proverbs Colloquialisms	All Texts (no limits on text type) - All content areas	Functionally equivalent to a HAWENS (Highly Articulate Well Educated Native Speaker)
LEVEL 4 Support opinion Hypothesize Discuss an abstract topic Formal and informal role plays	Extended Discourse Level (well organized discourse) - Abstract topics - Universally relevant topics - Rich repertoire of cultural references	Speaks effortlessly and smoothly; Can set tone; Possesses broad vocabulary; Can tailor, counsel, persuade, negotiate
LEVEL 3 Support opinion Hypothesize Discuss an abstract topic Unfamiliar situation	Discourse Level - Practical - Social - Professional - Abstract topics - Cultural references	Speaks readily Effectively combines structure and vocabulary; Can converse formally and informally (performing tasks)
LEVEL 2 Narration in the present Narration in the past Narration in the future Physical description Instructions or directions Reporting facts about	Paragraph Level (cohesive discourse) - Concrete topics - Background - Everyday activities - Work	Speaks with confidence; Can do level two tasks ; Can be understood by a native speaker NOT USED to dealing with foreigners

¹⁰ Adapted from DLI OPI tester training materials.

current events; Survival situation with complication		
LEVEL 1 Simple short conversation Examinee asks questions Basic survival situation	Sentence Level - Minimum courtesy requirements - Simple biographical information - Everyday survival topics	Creates sentences; Asks and answers questions; Creates / functions with language; Can participate in a short conversation; Can satisfy basic survival needs; Can be understood by a native speaker USED to dealing with foreigners
LEVEL 0+ Basic objects / Basic colors Clothing / Date / Family Members / Months / Time Weather / Weekdays / Year	Word Level - 10 desperate questions	Lists words and memorized phrases; Communicates with memorized material; Telegraphic nature of utterances

APPENDIX CSample OPI Role-Play Situations, Levels 1-3¹¹

LEVEL	Situations	Comments
3 Unfamiliar Situations	You have been living for some time in an apartment in Petersburg. Your next-door neighbor suddenly decides to take piano lessons and starts practicing every evening which annoys you a lot. Go to your neighbor and try to solve the problem. The tester will play the role of your neighbor.	In order to successfully handle an unfamiliar situation a student has to be aware of cultural norms a native speaker has internalized, and of a number of societal “DOs” and “DON”Ts.” Thus, for this situation a student should know the rules for conduct in an apartment building and the acceptable ways for dealing with neighbors.
2 Basic Survival Situations with Complications	1) Same basic situation as for level 1 (clothes store), yet there are complications, such as: the American does not know his Russian sizes, and the salesperson does not know the American ones; wrong currency, items the customer wants are lacking, etc. 2) Same basic situation as for level 1 (missed flight), possible complications could involve: computers down, no	In order to successfully handle such basic situations with complications, a student has to have both enough language and enough cultural knowledge to come up with a solution to a troublesome situation, to deal with a native speaker not used to dealing with foreigners (and sometimes not willing to accommodate one) and yet to accomplish his/her task at hand.

¹¹ Adapted from role-play situations used at the Defense Language Institute in 2005-2006 for Russian OPIs.

	available flights, too expensive plane ticket, etc.	
1 Basic Survival Situations without Complications	<p>1) You are at a clothing store in Novosibirsk, where you will be staying for some time. You need to buy some clothes for colder weather. The tester will play the role of the store clerk. Talk with him/her and arrange to buy what you need.</p> <p>2) You have just completed your trip to Moscow and will be traveling to the U.S. this evening. You missed your flight. Go to the airline reservation desk and book another flight. The tester will play the role of the airline employee.</p>	These basic situations without complications allow the student to not only use the language creatively but demand a certain amount of cultural knowledge as well.

APPENDIX DFunctional Description of Proficiency Levels in Four Language Skills¹²

	Speaking	Reading	Listening	Writing
LEVEL 3 (ILR) Superior (ACTFL)	Participates effectively in most formal and informal conversations about practical, social and professional topics within a shared context	Reads a variety of prose on unfamiliar subjects that may include opinions, hypothesis and analysis	Understands essentials of all speech, grasps opinion and inferences	Able to write effectively in most formal and informal exchanges. Errors never interfere with comprehension, rarely disturb the native reader
LEVEL 2 Advanced Low/Mid	Handles routine, high-frequency limited interactions and conversations about current events, family and common topics	Reads simple, authentic, straightforward material on familiar topics; uses contextual clues	Understands routine conversations and discourse about familiar topics; gleans all the facts	Meets limited social and work requirements. Can write simple paragraphs about daily situation and current events. Comprehensible to a native

¹² Adapted from DLI Materials for the Instructor's Certification Course, 2000.

				reader not used to reading the writing of foreigners.
LEVEL 1 Intermediate Low/Mid	Maintains very simple conversations on familiar topics; cannot produce continuous discourse unless rehearsed	Reads simple predictable material in print or type; identifies general topics	Understands basic survival utterances, simple questions and answers on familiar topics, main ideas	Meets limited practical needs. Can create simple statements and questions. Comprehensible to a native reader used to reading the writing of foreigners.
LEVEL 0+ Novice High	Produces telegraphic utterances for immediate survival needs	Reads alphabet of high frequency characters, recognizes some numbers and isolated words	Understands memorized utterances in areas of immediate needs with extra linguistic cues	Writes memorized material – numbers, dates, name, address, etc., lists of common items. Spelling and representation of symbols may be incorrect.

APPENDIX EText Typology¹³

Level	Author Intent	Text Type	Possible Contributors to Textual Difficulty
4/5	Project By suggesting lines of thought beyond the expected to previously unrelated ideas and concepts	Projective All styles and forms, virtuosity with language, unpredictable turns of thought	Subtlety, nuances, synonymous words, phrases, proverbs; cultural, literary, socio-linguistic allusions; word play, double meaning; concepts discussed; syntax – idiosyncratic, used with virtuosity; content – idiosyncratic, highly abstract, highly dense culturally
3	Evaluate By making evaluative statements, presenting and supporting hypotheses with both factual and abstract content	Evaluative Abstract, unfamiliar topics, texts may present author intended inference, hypothesis and suasion	Author's intent; supported opinion; shared assumptions; author-intended inferences; variety of sentence structures; styles and the effect of their interplay when more than one is employed; rhetorical devices; issues discussed; syntax – abstract linguistic formulations; content

¹³ Adapted from DLI workshop Text Typology, May 2005, materials. The nature and complexity of grammatical and rhetorical elements of a text is language specific. The given chart refers to texts in English.

			– abstract topics
2	Instruct By communicating factual information	Instructive Simple, recurring news material, vocabulary topic-specific, complex sentences, knowledge of target language culture required	Sentence length; amount of information conveyed per sentence; paragraph structure; discourse structure: narration, compare & contrast, cause & effect, description, cohesive devices; syntax – simple, compound, mixed sentences; content – physical world
1	Orient By communicating ideas	Orientalional Simple short sentences, simple vocabulary, mostly here-and-now	Orthography (mostly for radically different alphabets); isolated words; occasional isolated phrases; syntax – from lists to simple sentences;
0+	List	Enumerative Numbers, isolated words and phrases, names, street signs	content – of frequent everyday nature

APPENDIX FSample Texts of Various Proficiency Levels¹⁴

Level	Sample Text	Comments
3	<p>EXAMINING THE PHYSICS OF THE DEADLY DYNAMIC OF PANIC IN CROWDS</p> <p>Around the world, wherever large groups gather, people have witnessed the mysterious power of panic. Twelve people died in July at a soccer match in Zimbabwe. And several times in the last decade, Muslim pilgrims making the holy journey to Mecca have metamorphosed into sprawling, deadly human stampedes – all episodes seemingly without reason. A team of scientists now say they have built a powerful computer program that, for the first time, solves the mystery of how crowds move under pressure, a program that will help architects and emergency planners prevent panics.</p> <p>“This is an elegant and important study,” said Seth Lloyd, an associate professor of mechanical engineering at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology in Cambridge. “It will even save lives.”</p>	<p>Texts of this level often refer to societal phenomena. They also tend to be longer, so this excerpt is only the beginning of an extended text that contains a discussion of such a phenomenon with some scientific vocabulary.</p>
2	<p>MEXICAN LIZARDS FIRST BORN IN CAPTIVITY</p> <p>DETROIT (AP) – Four Mexican beaded lizards were hatched at the Detroit Zoo, and zoo officials say the births, possibly the first in captivity, were quite a surprise. The zoo has three adult lizards, but no one was exactly sure if they were males or females, said William A. Austin, curator</p>	<p>Texts of this level are often reports on factual events, and this one came from a daily news-</p>

¹⁴ Adapted from the materials of a DLI workshop on Text Typology (May 2005.)

	<p>of education. Four eggs hatched between Jan. 31 and Feb. 11 but zoo officials waited until last week to announce the births to protect the newborns from too much attention.</p>	<p>paper. Original formatting had to be altered, the actual text had three paragraphs.</p>										
<p>1</p>	<p>LIBRARY BOARD TO MEET The Monterey Public Library board will meet Wednesday at 4 p.m. in the community room of the library, 625 Pacific St., Monterey.</p>	<p>This was an actual announcement in a city library.</p>										
<p>0+</p>	<p>FIVE DAY FORECAST</p> <table border="1" data-bbox="238 760 839 1034"> <thead> <tr> <th>Today</th> <th>Saturday</th> <th>Sunday</th> <th>Monday</th> <th>Tuesday</th> </tr> </thead> <tbody> <tr> <td>Wind:N W5-10 Partly cloudy and mild High:62 Low:41</td> <td>Wind:N 5-10 Mostly sunny and warm High:64 Low:42</td> <td>Contin- ued warm and sunny High:63 Low:42</td> <td>Partly cloudy condi- tions High:59 Low:41</td> <td>A mix of sun and clouds High:58 Low:41</td> </tr> </tbody> </table>	Today	Saturday	Sunday	Monday	Tuesday	Wind:N W5-10 Partly cloudy and mild High:62 Low:41	Wind:N 5-10 Mostly sunny and warm High:64 Low:42	Contin- ued warm and sunny High:63 Low:42	Partly cloudy condi- tions High:59 Low:41	A mix of sun and clouds High:58 Low:41	<p>Visual clues are very important at this level. The actual weather forecast from a newspaper had clear pictures illustrating weather conditions for each day.</p>
Today	Saturday	Sunday	Monday	Tuesday								
Wind:N W5-10 Partly cloudy and mild High:62 Low:41	Wind:N 5-10 Mostly sunny and warm High:64 Low:42	Contin- ued warm and sunny High:63 Low:42	Partly cloudy condi- tions High:59 Low:41	A mix of sun and clouds High:58 Low:41								

APPENDIX G

Polish proficiency certificate exams within the European system of language testing of European Council and of the Association of Language Testers in Europe (ALTE).¹⁵

ALTE	European Council	English	Deutsch	Français	Polski [Polish]
LEVEL 5 Good User	C2 Mastery Level	Certificate of Proficiency in English (CPE)	Zentrale Oberstufenprüfung (ZOP), Kleines Deutsches Sprachdiplom (KDS)	Diplôme de Hautes Etudes Françaises (DHEF)	Poziom zaawansowany [Advanced Level]
LEVEL 4 Competent User	C1 Effective Operational Proficiency	Certificate of Proficiency in English (CPE)	Zentrale Mittelstufenprüfung (ZMP)	Diplôme supérieur D'Etudes Françaises (DS)	¹⁶
LEVEL 3 Independent User	B2 Vantage Level	First Certificate in English (FCE)		Diplôme de Langue Française (DL)	Poziom średni ogólny [Intermediate General Level]
LEVEL 2 Threshold User	B1 Threshold Level	Preliminary English Test	Zertifikat Deutsch (ZD)	Certificat d'Etudes de Français Prati-	Poziom podstawowy [Basic

¹⁵ Adapted from a booklet on the State Certification Examination in Polish as a Foreign Language for the Intermediate Level published by the Department of Education and Sports in 2003.

¹⁶ The empty blocks in this table correspond to the tests at certain levels of proficiency, which do not exist in a given language.

		(PET)		tique 2 (CEFP2)	Level]
LEVEL 1 Waystage User	A2 Waystage Level	Key English Test (KET)	Grundbau stein Deutsch als Fremdspra che (GBS DaF)	Certificat d'Etudes de Fran- çais Pra- tique 1 (CEFP1)	
Break- through	A1 Break- through Level				

APPENDIX H

Grammar Portion of a Sample Polish Proficiency Test at the Intermediate Level (PL B2)¹⁷

Part B. Grammar Accuracy.

(8 tasks, 60 minutes) Maximum number of points: ___/40 p.

1. *Underline the appropriate form. ___/4.5 p. (9 × 0.5p.)*

Iwona and Arthur have (four – four - four) friends. ...

(The following text about a family with many children and friends checks the mastery of numerals. Variants of numerals are given in brackets, and the student has to choose the correct form. A model given at the beginning of the text, which is, at the same time, its first sentence, gives various forms of the word “four” (“cztery”-“czworo”-“czterej.”) Russian has a comparable variety of forms, and for a grammar test in Russian it could have been, for example, “chetyre”-“chetvero”-“chetyrech”-“chetyrem,” etc....)

2. *Fill in the blank in the text with the verbs from the frame following the example provided (verb aspect). ___/5 (10 × 0.5p.)*

About half a year ago Magda caused a car accident. ...

(In the following text about a car accident, the student has to choose, out of a dozen aspectual pairs provided, the correct verb, its aspect and tense. The first sentence of the story serves as a model, with the verb filled in. Similarly to Russian, Polish verb aspects are complex and represent another challenging element of advanced grammar, as do numerals.)

3. *Fill in the blanks following the example provided. ___/5p. (20 × 0.25)*

Model: I like highlander's costume (highlander's costume).

I like highlanders' costumes (highlander's costume – pl).

(In the following text, which describes tourists traveling in the mountains, nouns or noun+adjective phrases in singular are offered in

¹⁷ Adapted and translated from a brochure on the Polish Proficiency Test at the Intermediate Level, Department of State Education and Sport, Warsaw, 2003. The portion in italics is my translation from Polish of the actual test assignment and the model, the portion in brackets describes the rest of each exercise.

brackets and the student has to change them to plural forms and to use the case dictated by the linguistic surrounding.)

4. Based on the following note, fill in the text following the model. ___/ 5p. (5 × 1p.)

War to gangs! What should be done to fight bandits? Results of a survey:

Equip the police better 73%

Use strict measures 71%

Train the police better 63%

Expand telephone surveillance authority for law enforcement 16%

Increase police pensions 15%

According to the survey responses, the following factors could have an impact on fighting bandits: ...

(The student has to reformulate the information given in a note while forming nouns out of the verbs used in it. Thus it would be something like “equipment of the police,” “usage of strict measures”...)

5. Replace the underlined phrases with adjectival and adverbial participles. Change word order wherever necessary. ___/ 8p (8 × 1 p.)

Model: Timothy poured some coffee, which they prepared previously, drank it with pleasure and waited for a colleague, who was late.

Timothy poured some previously prepared coffee and drank it with pleasure, waiting for the colleague running late. ...

(The following text is about a young man trying to strike up an acquaintance with a girl in a café. The model gives and transforms the first sentence of a coherent story. The continuation contains expressions in brackets that the student must transform as required. Participial forms in Polish and Russian function similarly, so such an exercise could be useful in testing grammar in Russian.)

6. Rephrase the following text, changing it from active to passive voice. ___/ 5p. (5 × 1 p.)

The Śląsk Museum Purchased New Paintings...

New Paintings Were Purchased by the Śląsk Museum...

(The first title and the following text, which is a brief formal report on an exhibition at a local museum, are in the active voice. The second title and the following text contain the same information ren-

dered in passive voice, with blanks to be filled in by the student using the required forms.)

7. Replace the underlined words in the brackets with imperatives. ____/2.5 p. (5 × 0.5 p.)

What should be avoided?

Do not blindly (to submit) submit to your partner's plans if you do not accept them...

(The given text is similar to an advice column in a popular magazine: it suggests what kinds of behavior must be avoided to assure a healthy relationship. Verb infinitives, provided in the brackets in the following four statements, should be replaced with imperatives.)

8. Rephrase the following text, using the expressions given in the table. ____/5p. (5 × 1 p.) because of / in spite of / in case of / for the purpose of / in the course of / after

Today I had a fever and that is why I did not go to school.

Today, because of my fever, I did not go to school....

(The following text is a coherent story about a visit to a doctor. The student, guided by the context, should choose appropriate expressions from among those provided and change each sentence accordingly. This exercise requires, on the part of the student, familiarity with a range of cohesive devices, and good mastery of the case system as each of the given expressions requires a specific case.)