

How to Reach Advanced Language Proficiency

Paula Winke
Michigan State University
2022

Highlights

- Three ingredients support advanced language proficiency: use, motivation, and identity
- Advanced language proficiency is helpful for brain flexibility, self-esteem, employment, and development of empathy.
- Advanced proficiency in languages is beneficial for cross-cultural understanding.

Developing advanced proficiency in a second language benefits both learners and the societies to which they belong. Educators, employers, and learners can define advanced level proficiency in a language as being able to use language for academic and professional purposes beyond daily life (ACTFL, 2012). But being able to use the language at work is not the only advantage of advanced proficiency. Advanced learners obtain numerous cognitive benefits that accompany fluency in a second language, including better cognitive control¹ (Xie, 2018), a brain with more flexibility (Bialystok, 2017), and a longer, healthier life by, for example, warding off impairments such as dementia (Perani & Abutalebi, 2015). Advanced learners derive psychological benefits from their successful learning experiences, such as high self-esteem (Rubio, 2007) and an increased sense of self (Darvin & Norton, 2016). Advanced users of additional languages also have access to more educational and employment opportunities (ACTFL, 2019; Ramírez-Esparza et al., 2020). These tangible advantages can lead to higher earnings, which benefit not just the person, but their families and future generations.

Societal benefits from advanced-level skills in languages are also vast and long-lasting. Advanced language skills allow meaningful intercultural exchange, which leads to more acceptance, tolerance, and compassion. High competence in intercultural communication helps people “address the root causes of some of the most virulent problems of today’s societies,” such as discrimination, racism, and hate speech (Huber, 2012, p. 5).

What’s the pathway? Practice, motivation, and identity construction

Given all the benefits of advanced proficiency in a second language, how can applied linguists and language educators support development of advanced levels of proficiency? What is the secret sauce? Research shows there are three key ingredients are (a) practice *using* the language, (b) long-term, *sustained motivation*, and (c) developing a positive *identity* as a user of the language.

Use the language

The key to learning a language to an advanced level is to use the language as much as possible at the advanced level. Like everything, language takes time and effort; one starts as a novice and gains proficiency through *use* (DeKeyser, 2020). Using a language to gain proficiency requires “specific activities in the second language

engaged in systematically, deliberately, with the goal of developing knowledge of and skills in the second language” (DeKeyser, p. 8). DeKeyser explained that using the language across different advanced-level contexts supports the development of advanced proficiency by decreasing three things: (a) the amount of attention one needs to pay when producing; (b) the amount of time it takes to produce language; and (c) the number of overall errors.

What’s the best way to use language to promote advanced proficiency? First, the language production and use should be *active*. As Ortega wrote (2009), only through actively using the language do language learners fully process the syntax needed to express themselves. While the importance of active practice may seem obvious today, back in the 1990s, language researchers debated whether learners needed to produce language to improve, or whether they simply need to hear and read the language. The conclusion—which guides much language education today—is that active practice is essential for learning. Students learn by doing.

Language use should allow learners to employ multiple language skills at the same time. To accomplish this, teachers must create *tasks* for students that have media components that are necessary to use to accomplish the task, and those media, whether digital or physical, should include listening, reading, speaking, and writing (González-Lloret, 2020). Moreover, feedback and learning should be integrated into an iterative process, with students revising and repeating their work based on the feedback they obtain from their teachers, their classroom peers, and also from their own self-evaluations (Bitchener, 2019).

Finally, learning should be *cooperative and engaging*, so that learners build an equitable community of learning (González-Lloret, 2020) and experience *flow* (Ibrahim & Al-Hoorie, 2019). This means that learners are so fully engaged and absorbed in their tasks that they lose senses of time. Thus, a teacher’s main goal can be seen as encouraging production through establishing the right conditions for high-level practice, conditions that include not just hard work, but task enjoyment (Lee, 2020).

Motivation

Use supports the development of proficiency, but learners will only use the language frequently if they are motivated to do so (Campbell & Storch, 2011). Thus, the second key ingredient for acquiring advanced language skills is to build motivation to encourage language use (Huhtala et al., 2019).

One way learners can build that motivation is to focus on domains of language that they personally want to improve. Students who do so will become agents of their own learning and be knowledgeable about their learning goals and trajectory (Ushioda, 2009). To help build self-motivation, teachers can ask learners how they “think and feel about language learning” (Ushioda, 2009, p. 219). Doing so will promote motivation that is *intrinsic*, which is most likely to promote long-term learning, and thus increases the chance of advanced-level proficiency (Nagle, 2021).

That motivation must also be *long-lasting*. Advanced-level attainment takes a great

deal of time and effort (Dörnyei & Al-Hoorie, 2017), so learners seeking advanced skills must consistently seek practice opportunities both inside and outside of the classroom. And as they improve, they need to use the language with increasing levels of task difficulty and within more diverse social circles, including academic or professional ones, which means their motivation must change and adapt to new learning conditions (Campbell & Storch, 2011).

Identity

How can students gain motivation that is both intrinsic and long-lasting? One answer lies in *identity*. When language learning coincides with personal identity construction, a person changes from a mere learner of the language to an *owner* and *rightful user* of the language. A person who feels that way can experience a powerful desire to practice and learn. This is because continued improvement reinforces the person's linguistic identity (Gardner, 2019). Identity construction is thus an important part of developing and maintaining motivation to learn a second language (Norton & De Costa, 2018).

That linguistic identity—that feeling of ownership—is highly individual and molded by the unique characteristics of each learner (Norton & De Costa, 2018). But linguistic identity also exists in a social context. It is a feeling of belonging, and it is shaped by engaging “in linguistic practices with various people” (Norton & De Costa, 2018, p. 93). Given the social aspect of language identity, even if learners are motivated, they will only be able to participate if they see themselves as welcomed practitioners in the community. For that reason, Norton and De Costa explained, it is vital that classrooms and learning communities be free from discrimination based on race, gender, or sexual orientation.

Learning a language is deeply connected to both individual identity and community belonging. Language teachers should therefore recognize that they are not just teaching language; they are teaching human agency. And learners should understand that they are doing more than learning a language. They are trying on a new mantle of thought, expression, and identity, especially if they stick with learning the language for a long time, and to an advanced level.

Conclusion

In sum, the right conditions for developing advanced levels of proficiency are threefold. First, learners should engage in advanced-level language tasks (i.e., *use* the language at the advanced level) as much as possible, and get critical yet helpful feedback on their use that they can act upon to build up their skillsets. Second, they should develop *sustained motivation* through the establishment of long-term, personally rewarding goals for using the language. And third, learners should interact with a variety of people who help them develop a positive *identity* as a user of the language. By using advanced language in different settings with various people, learners change and develop tactics, reformulate their ability to remember language and vocabulary, and try new combinations of skills to better communicate their intent. These practices also expand the learners' socio-cultural worldview, because the practice is a socio-cultural exchange.

Thus, in order to help students attain high levels of proficiency, teachers, materials designers, and learners need to collaborate to create a positive, empathetic, and motivating environment in which language learning is engaging and meaningful. Teachers must set the conditions to help students engage and experience flow when learning through a variety of culturally rich and complex media. The teacher's goal is to motivate students to practice through socialization processes that encourage creativity, skill-building, self-expression, and lively exchanges. Learners work together to build sustained motivation and identity, which can lead to lifelong learning and openness to join additional language-learning communities. It is that community and cultural exchange, in the end, that makes the world go around in peaceful ways.

Notes

Xie (2018, p. 1) defined cognitive control as “the ability to control behavior and thought by maintaining, focusing on, or switching goals and plans while at the same time ignoring irrelevant information.” Xie explained that second-language acquisition researchers have found that bilinguals perform better on cognitive control tasks than monolinguals. The hypothesis is that cognitive control is learned through experience in using two (or more) languages.

References

- ACTFL. (2012). *ACTFL performance descriptors for language learners*. The American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages. https://www.actfl.org/sites/default/files/publications/ACTFLPerformance_Descriptors.pdf
- ACTFL. (2019). *Making languages our business: Addressing foreign language demand among U.S. employers*. The American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages. https://www.leadwithlanguages.org/wp-content/uploads/MakingLanguagesOurBusiness_FullReport.pdf
- Bialystok, E. (2017). The bilingual adaptation: How minds accommodate experience. *Psychological Bulletin*, 143(3), 233–262. <https://doi.org/10.1037/bul0000099>
- Bitchener, J. (2019). The intersection between SLA and feedback research. In K. Hyland & F. Hyland (Eds.), *Feedback in second language writing: Contexts and issues* (pp. 85–105). Cambridge University Press.
- Campbell, E., & Storch, N. (2011). The changing face of motivation a study of second language learners' motivation over time. *Australian Review of Applied Linguistics*, 34(2), 166–192. <https://doi.org/10.1075/ara1.34.2.03cam>
- Darvin, R., & Norton, B. (2016). Investment and language learning in the 21st century. *Langage et Société*, 157(3), 19–38. <https://doi.org/10.3917/lis.157.0019>
- Dörnyei, Z., & Al-Hoorie, A. H. (2017). The motivational foundation of learning languages other than global English: Theoretical issues and research directions. *Modern Language Journal*, 101(3), 455–468. <https://doi.org/10.1111/modl.12408>
- Gardner, R. C. (2019). The socio-educational model of second language acquisition. In M.

Lamb, K. Csizér, A. Henry, & S. Ryan (Eds.), *The Palgrave handbook of motivation for language learning* (pp. 21–37). Springer.

González-Lloret, M. (2020). Collaborative tasks for online language teaching. *Foreign Language Annals*, 53(2), 260–269. <https://doi.org/10.1111/flan.12466>

Huber, J. (Ed.). (2012). *Intercultural competence for all: Preparation for living in a heterogeneous world*. Council of Europe. <https://rm.coe.int/intercultural-competence-for-all/16808ce20c>

Huhtala, A., Kursiša, A., & Vesalainen, M. (2019). “This language still motivates me!” Advanced language students and their L2 motivation. *Studies in Second Language Learning and Teaching*, 9(2), 287–311. <https://doi.org/10.14746/ssl1t.2019.9.2.3>

Ibrahim, Z., & Al-Hoorie, A. H. (2019). Shared, sustained flow: Triggering motivation with collaborative projects. *ELT Journal*, 73(1), 51–60. <https://doi.org/10.1093/elt/ccy025>

Lee, J. S. (2020). The role of grit and classroom enjoyment in EFL learners’ willingness to communicate. *Journal of Multilingual and Multicultural Development*. Advance online publication. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01434632.2020.1746319>

Nagle, C. (2021). Using Expectancy Value Theory to understand motivation, persistence, and achievement in university-level foreign language learning. *Foreign Language Annals*. Advance online publication. <https://doi.org/10.1111/flan.12569>

Norton, B., & De Costa, P. I. (2018). Research tasks on identity in language learning and teaching. *Language Teaching*, 51(1), 90–112. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0261444817000325>

Ortega, L. (2009). *Understanding second language acquisition*. Hodder Education.

Perani, D., & Abutalebi, J. (2015). Bilingualism, dementia, cognitive and neural reserve. *Current Opinion in Neurology*, 28(6), 618–625. <https://doi.org/10.1097/WCO.0000000000000267>

Ramírez-Esparza, N., García-Sierra, A., & Jiang, S. (2020). The current standing of bilingualism in today’s globalized world: A socio-ecological perspective. *Current Opinion in Psychology*, 32, 124–128. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.copsyc.2019.06.038>

Rubio, F. (2007). Self-esteem and foreign language learning: An introduction. In F. Rubio (Ed.), *Self-esteem and foreign language learning* (pp. 2–14). Cambridge Scholars Publishing.

Xie, Z. (2018). The influence of second language (L2) proficiency on cognitive control among young adult unblanced Chinese-English bilinguals. *Frontiers in Psychology*, 9, 1–9. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2018.00412>

How to Cite this Brief

Winke, P. (2022). How to Reach Advanced Language Proficiency. ACTFL Research Briefs. Retrieved from <https://www.actfl.org/how-reach-advanced-language-proficiency>.