III. FOREIGN LANGUAGE PROFICIENCY

As well as expecting all Stanford undergraduates to become proficient in writing and rhetoric in English, the University expects students to become proficient in at least one other language. The Commission on Undergraduate Education (CUE) justified the requirement as follows:

First, in a shrinking and increasingly interdependent world, competence in a foreign language improves the ability of individuals to function effectively as citizens and productive members of the global community. Second, foreign language competency is of immediate use to Americans who live in and/or work with multicultural communities throughout the United States, especially in California. Third, knowledge of a foreign language is a significant component of a humanistic education. … [providing] access to foreign cultures, histories and literatures. … Fourth, foreign language study promotes greater understanding of the nature of language, its structure and its role in the development of cognition. And fifth, one’s ability to understand and write the English language improves with the study of a foreign language. (CUE report, p. 16)

A list of Student Awards is contained in Appendix 18.
In this section, we report on our study of foreign language acquisition by focusing on student performance in first- and second-year sequences in three of our most commonly studied languages: Spanish, French, and Chinese. For information on the Language Center and its programs, see https://www.stanford.edu/dept/le/language/ and The Annual Report of the Language Center.

Program History

The most recent antecedent to the current foreign language requirement went into effect in the 1982–83 academic year. Since then, students have been required to complete at least one year of college-level study in a single foreign language or to demonstrate competency at a level comparable to the completion of the third quarter of first-year foreign language study at Stanford. Since 1996, any one of the following fulfills the requirement:

1. Completing three quarters of a first-year language course at Stanford or the equivalent at another recognized post-secondary institution.

2. Scoring a 4 or 5 on the Advanced Placement (AP) test in a language other than English.

3. Achieving a satisfactory score on the SAT II Subject Tests in the following languages:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Language</th>
<th>Score</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Chinese</td>
<td>630</td>
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<td>French</td>
<td>640</td>
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<tr>
<td>German</td>
<td>630</td>
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<td>Hebrew</td>
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<td>Italian</td>
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<td>Japanese</td>
<td>620</td>
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<tr>
<td>Latin</td>
<td>630</td>
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<tr>
<td>Spanish</td>
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4. Taking a diagnostic test in a particular language which either:
   a. Places a student out of the requirement, or
   b. Requires a student to enroll in one, two, or three additional quarters of college-level study. In this case, evidence of proficiency can then be fulfilled either by passing the required number of quarters of college-level language study at Stanford or the equivalent elsewhere, or by retaking the diagnostic test at a later date and placing out of the requirement.

Principles of the Language Program

The recommendations of the CUE resulted in a significant change in language instruction at Stanford. Although the number of units needed to complete the ‘82 –’83 requirement was not changed, the University set a higher standard for language proficiency. Students enrolling in language courses at Stanford are now expected to acquire and be assessed in four skills: listening, speaking, reading, and writing, going much beyond the traditional expectation to take and complete a course consisting of grammar exams.

Language programs at Stanford prepare students to acquire a foreign language capability that enhances their academic program and enables them to live, work, study, and conduct research in a different country. Stanford students need to be able to initiate interactions with persons from other cultures (first-year goal) and to engage with them on issues of mutual concern (second-year goal).

To accomplish these goals, language programs at Stanford are proficiency-oriented and standards-based. A proficiency orientation means an emphasis on listening, speaking, reading, and writing in ways that are immediately useful in a real world setting. Based in research on language and discourse functions, this

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16 Stanford offers instruction in more than a dozen foreign languages.
orientation is adaptive, compensatory, and developmental. *Standards-based* refers to the National Standards on Foreign Language Learning that attend not only to linguistic dimensions but also to connections that learners make between languages, cultures, and academic areas. Our programs are attentive to the pragmatics of each language and culture and respectful of the relationship between genre and function.

First-year programs assume no background and emphasize speaking and writing in ways that enable students to use language at the sentence level in order to interact with native speakers in an immediate time frame. Our program also focuses on reading and listening to, for example, short news and weather reports, short film and book reviews, and straightforward expository prose.

Second-year programs move students from a sentence-based, interpersonal level of language into a presentational, paragraph-based mode that expands students’ linguistic as well as interpretive repertoire. Students conduct research on topics of academic or professional interest and are taught to present on those topics in a manner that is linguistically and culturally appropriate. These programs emphasize more refined vocabulary as well as syntax that reflects complexity and nuance. Materials encapsulate genres such as editorials, politically-oriented news broadcasts, analytic essays, and short literary texts. Students use these materials as models for their writing so that they learn and cultivate a sophisticated language. Second-year programs are designed to enable students to study abroad or to continue with upper-level literature and culture classes.

Classes are taught in the language, and time on task is critical for learning. If students are to become proficient, they must speak together and with their teacher, they must read things in common and discuss those readings. Materials are authentic, meaning that they are not constructed for learners. When Stanford students listen to audio or video, they are listening to language and observing videos that native speakers would encounter in their daily lives. These materials are rarely modified linguistically or glossed.

The Stanford Language Center has been at the national forefront of implementing a systemic assessment program for all language programs. Indeed, the culture of assessment embodied in the Language Center’s reporting has facilitated an intensive discussion about the first- and second-year curricula to insure that the programs meet local standards, that is, the Stanford language requirement, the standards of various degree-granting programs that require language instruction such as Latin American Studies, the Center for Russian, Eastern European, and Eurasian Studies, the Center for East Asian Studies, and also national standards. The Language Center reports annually to the University’s Committee on Undergraduate Standards and Policies (C-USP).

**Earlier WASC Reporting**

In the previous WASC report (2000), submitted shortly after the Stanford Language Center was established (1995), data reporting was limited to oral proficiency ratings for first-year instruction. The report noted several reasons for this: first, oral proficiency is the most difficult skill to acquire in a formal setting and is, therefore, worthy of significant attention; second, oral proficiency was the dimension of language study perceived as lacking by the wider university community at the founding of the Language Center; third, the University was focused on student accomplishment in the required one year of language study; and fourth, a nationally recognized scale and a concomitant training program were available. This fourth reason enabled the Language Center to compare Stanford student performance across languages, programs, and institutions.

During the period from 1995 to 2000, enrollment in language courses increased from around 1300 students per quarter to 1600 even though more than 40% of entering freshmen had completed the enhanced requirement upon entry to Stanford. The 2000 WASC submission also reported that over the period from
1995 to 2000, most students completing the foreign language requirement were in the intermediate range of oral proficiency.

Since our 2000 WASC report, language enrollments have risen to an average of 2000 students per quarter, meaning that language courses comprise the largest sector of the undergraduate curriculum. Presently, more than 50% of entering Stanford students complete the language requirement before matriculation. Still, enrollments have continued to rise, with an increase of 17% in second-year courses since the mid-1990’s, indicating that students are either continuing to take entering languages to higher levels or that they are adding more language to their undergraduate programs.

This report to WASC is substantially more extensive than the previous one. It provides data on the oral proficiency of cohorts of students enrolled in language classes since the time of the previous WASC report. It includes, for the first time, data on writing proficiency; it examines both the first- and second-year of language instruction, and it examines the change in language proficiency of students who study abroad.

The 2000 WASC Evaluation Team praised Stanford’s efforts in enhancing foreign language instruction yet questioned whether we could sustain our initiatives at an already high level of achievement. The data demonstrate that we have sustained the levels we reported in 2000, and in addition we can now report high levels of achievement not only for oral proficiency but also in writing, in second-year courses, and in language acquisition of those who attend our overseas centers.

**Description of the Study**

In order to determine whether we are fulfilling the objectives of our language instruction we designed a study to address the following three core questions and then assessed performance for students studying our three most popular languages: Spanish, French, and Chinese.17

- What level of oral and written proficiency was reached at the end of one year and at the end of two years of instruction?
- What was the level of improvement for students with some prior knowledge of a foreign language who enroll in foreign language courses?
- For students who studied at a Stanford center abroad, what was the level of oral and written proficiency reached at the end of one quarter?

Each language program at Stanford has articulated proficiency goals for first-year oral competency. The goals for first-year instruction are an Intermediate Mid (IM) level of oral proficiency in the cognate languages (French, German, Italian, and Spanish) and Novice High (NH) in the non-cognate languages (Japanese and Chinese). These proficiency levels are based on the national scale, the Foreign Service Institute/American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages scale (FSI-ACTFL scale).18 Nationwide studies indicate that foreign language majors generally achieve an Intermediate Mid rating on oral proficiency interviews. According to the Foreign Service Institute, an IM in the cognate languages and an NH in the non-cognate languages are generally met after an average of 300-400 hours of instruction. Stanford courses meet 150 hours over the course of an academic year.

Recently, a national scale for the development of writing proficiency—which follows the general outline of the oral proficiency scale—was finalized. The assessment focuses on functional writing ability,

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17 These three languages make up about 75% of all language enrollments.

18 The FSI-ACTFL scale has ten levels: Novice Low (NL), Novice Mid (NM), Novice High (NH); Intermediate Low (IL), Intermediate Mid (IM), Intermediate High (IH); Advanced Low (AL), Advanced Mid (AM), Advanced High (AH); and Superior (S). The Novice level entails word-level speech; Intermediate, sentence-level speech; Advanced and Superior, paragraph-level speech and beyond.
measuring how well a person writes in a language by comparing the performance of specific writing tasks with the criteria stated in the ACTFL Proficiency Guidelines—Writing (Revised 2001).\textsuperscript{19} Stanford is in the process of creating parallel proficiency goals for writing, as done previously in the area of oral proficiency.

For this study, we examined data from two sources. For oral proficiency, we report data collected over ten years. In the years 1999–2004, we have data on the proficiency of 970 students enrolled in Spanish language classes, 356 in French classes, and 290 students studying Chinese. Our reporting for the years 2005–2009 includes 675 Spanish language students, 282 French students, and 306 students studying Chinese.

To report on writing skill, second-year language acquisition, education-abroad language programs, and oral proficiency, we selected a sample of 500 students enrolled in language classes during the 2008-09 academic year (283 in Spanish; 107 in French; and 110 in Chinese). Due to student absenteeism or technical problems from equipment and/or human error, this data set decreased to 467 students. Of these students, 64\% were continuing with their high school language; two were taking two foreign languages simultaneously (French and Chinese; and Spanish and French); 103 of the students (22\%) took more than one language in high school; 93 students (20\%) took (or are taking) more than one language at Stanford. Fifty-two students in the group (11\%) entered Stanford with AP scores of 4 or 5. Thirty-six of them went on to study at Madrid and 23 went to Santiago; 25 studied in Paris; and 17 in Beijing. Seven of 23 Santiago students (30\%) were heritage speakers of Spanish. Only three Madrid students (8\%) were heritage students, although two additional students entered Stanford with extremely high levels of Spanish. Two heritage speakers of Chinese (12\%) studied in Beijing.\textsuperscript{20}

Oral competency for the group was assessed in May-June 2009 for on-campus students in the Digital Language Laboratory.\textsuperscript{21} For students studying abroad at our centers in Madrid, Santiago, Paris, or Beijing we conducted a pre-test, oral (OPI) and written (WPA), prior to their departure. They were re-tested at the end of their overseas study experience (about 10 weeks later).

We report our results below using the FSI-ACTFL scale. This is an ordinal scale and the distances between the ten points on the scale are not equal.\textsuperscript{22} (Appendix 19 contains raw data on proficiency testing, both oral and written, for all sections of this study.)

Results

\textit{Proficiency after One and Two Years of Study}

This set of studies addressed the primary mission of the Language Center and the goals of the language requirement: the first year focuses on sentence construction and the second year on the ability to initiate interactions with persons from other cultures. The data shows that the overwhelming majority of our students in each language are in the intermediate range in their oral proficiency after completing their first year of instruction. Language acquisition varied over our three languages with most students testing between Intermediate Low and Intermediate Mid level in Spanish and French and between Novice High and

\textsuperscript{19} We currently have not established a proficiency-writing goal in parallel to our oral standard. Over the next few years, however, repeated evaluation of the Writing Proficiency Assessment (WPA) will allow us to set such standards.

\textsuperscript{20} See Appendix 19b for cohort year of students by language.

\textsuperscript{21} The collection of oral proficiency data via the Simulated Oral Proficiency Interview (SOPI) is a normal part of our language teaching culture, and we report the data for this group in our five-year figures.

\textsuperscript{22} The distance between an Intermediate Low and an Intermediate Mid rating, for example, is less than that between an Intermediate High and an Advanced Low because of the nature of the tasks and discourse required at these different levels.
Intermediate Low in Chinese. Figure 1 illustrates the general level of oral proficiency found in our tested students in five-year segments for Spanish, French, and Chinese.

Figure 2 reports the data on second-year student oral proficiency for those completing a Stanford language sequence. Students continue to progress, moving on average into the Intermediate High and Advanced ranges.

Figures 3 and 4 show writing proficiency, again for first- and then second-year students. Student writing performance after one year of instruction is slightly higher than oral proficiency in the cognate languages of Spanish and French and slightly lower in the non-cognate language
Chinese. This difference continues into the second year with considerably more progress on writing in Spanish and French than in Chinese.

**Improvement in Language Skills for Students with Prior Knowledge**

Virtually all of our students arrive having studied a language in high school. Students who continue in that language take an exam and are placed at an appropriate level. In Figure 5 we report on findings on performance for this group of students, measuring change from their initial assessment. Our analysis is based on 118 Spanish students, 51 French students, and 12 Chinese students (39%) in the pool who had a prior oral examination assessment on file.

In all cases, students made significant progress in their oral proficiency from their initial assessment to their exit assessment in 2009. More French students had a lower starting point (in the Novice range) than did the Spanish or Chinese students, who began language study at Stanford on average in the Intermediate Low range. Each group completed their course of study at least approaching or reaching Intermediate Mid. We can report with confidence that students’ progress can be measured and is demonstrably improved by further language study at Stanford.

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**Significance levels for the language studies have been set at p<.05. All three were significant at the .001 level: Spanish, t(117)=−10.69, p<.001; French, t(50)=−6.70, p<.001; Chinese, t(11)=−5.74, p<.001.**
Stanford has long encouraged students to spend some portion of their undergraduate experience studying abroad. For this study, we wanted to assess students’ foreign language preparation for overseas study and determine the extent of improvement after their time abroad. We tested them before their departure and upon their return.

Figure 6 displays the pre- and post-test results for these students. All students made significant progress in their oral proficiency. Spanish students in Madrid and Santiago began their study at the respective campuses as Intermediates and exited in the Advanced Low stage; Paris students started at Intermediate Mid on average and approached Intermediate High; Beijing students increased almost a full half step from an Intermediate Mid, approaching Advanced. These changes were all statistically significant.24

Figure 7 shows our findings for written language proficiency improvement abroad. Madrid and Santiago students were on average Intermediate High to Advanced and exited approaching Advanced High in their writing proficiency. Paris students exhibited the narrowest range of progress from an Intermediate Low to approaching an Intermediate Mid. Beijing students departed Stanford with an average Intermediate Low rating in their writing proficiency and completed their study abroad approaching Intermediate Mid. Again, all progress was statistically significant.25

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24 Madrid: t(34)=−6.05, p<.001; Santiago: t(22)=−5.25, p<.001; Paris: t(22)=−4.72, p<.0001; Beijing: t(15)=−3.87, p=.001
25 Madrid: t(35)=−10.69, p<.001; Santiago: t(19)=−3.62, p=.001; Paris: t(24)=−2.45, p=.02; Beijing: t(15)=−2.78, p=.01
Interpretation of Studies

Our data indicate that most students are moving toward being able to write in a foreign language at the paragraph level in the cognate languages—a level slightly beyond their speaking ability—after completing the first-year sequence. Even Chinese learners, working through the hurdles of a character-based writing system, are constructing full sentences in the first year of instruction. The data illustrate cross-linguistic challenges that students face; they show that oral proficiency in Chinese is easier to acquire than written proficiency and that written proficiency in Spanish and French comes at a faster rate because of the cognate nature of these languages.

Second-year data provides us with insight into the efficacy of second-year programs. Students progress through the FSI-ACTFL scale entering the Intermediate High and Advanced range. These data indicate that Stanford language students completing a second-year of study are generally well beyond published assessments of students who major in these languages (most universities report that level as Intermediate Mid) and that they are well prepared to conduct advanced work and to study and live abroad. As another point of comparison, these ranges—Intermediate High and Advanced—are the same required by NCATE for teacher certification in foreign language instruction. These findings are striking evidence of the success of our language programs.
Questions always arise regarding the value added of a Stanford education. Is it only that we have good students upon entry? For the language programs, the answer is that students who arrive at Stanford with some language knowledge will increase that knowledge if they take a language sequence. Students do not stagnate in their language knowledge but rather progress in their speaking and writing abilities.

The study also revealed that students move easily between on- and off-campus programs, suggesting that our sequenced language programs succeed in teaching needed language skills. Students return from overseas campuses with greater facility in their speaking and writing. Spanish students, in particular, make remarkable progress and are able to conduct academic work with confidence in a Spanish-speaking setting. Students who studied in Madrid showed a greater improvement in Spanish language proficiency than those students who studied in Santiago. The difference may be that Madrid students take a language pledge to speak only Spanish during their 10-week stay while those in Santiago do not.

These data also allowed us to assess the impact of a number of curricular decisions made since our previous WASC reporting on student proficiency levels. Three key features surface: the first concerns placement testing; the second, our conservative internal assessment procedures; and the third, the nature of the French program.

First, we have improved our placement testing. In the period during 1995–2004, students could self-place into our language sequence since our internal placement procedure was optional. This resulted in some misplacement, most often with some students in first-year courses who had too high a proficiency level upon entry into those classes. We now know that students should not be in first-year courses who test at or above an Intermediate High level. Testing eliminated instructor concerns that there was often too much heterogeneity in their courses and student complaints that they had difficulty performing in classes where some of students were at a significantly higher level of proficiency. Mandated placement procedures have led to a tightening of the distribution of proficiency levels around the intermediate level. The rogue advanced level has by and large disappeared from first-year data. Mandated placement procedures also facilitate the transition between on-campus and overseas campuses, helping us make better placement decisions when students leave campus.

Second, the study reinforced the value of using the Simulated Oral Proficiency Interview (SOPI). We have invested more than a million dollars in professional development, principally on the focused Oral Proficiency Interview (OPI) training. At the time of the 2000 WASC assessment, we had only four certified raters across all languages; by 2006, we had 16, and by 2009, 36. This explosion in numbers fundamentally changed language teaching at Stanford. It meant that more instructors were teaching according to proficiency principles and assessing accordingly. It also led to a greater understanding of the differences between face-to-face and simulated interviews. The simulated interview is always more restrictive. Hence, there is a tendency in SOPI assessment to err on the conservative side, awarding speakers lower scores. We will keep this in mind in subsequent testing for placement and proficiency.

Third, our findings prompt us to look at the nature of the French program, particularly the second-year curriculum and the transition to the Paris campus. The data are by and large comparable to the Chinese data, with the students demonstrating lower proficiencies than exhibited in the Spanish data. The linguistic commonalities between French and Spanish underline our concern. We concluded that the data need to be interpreted against the local context. Among the three languages, it is most difficult for students of the French language to find practice opportunities; comparatively, one can hear and practice both Spanish and Chinese at any time of the day in the geographic area around Stanford. Moreover, second-year French

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26 One sees this tendency repeatedly in our cross-validation measures. The outside ratings tended to be higher. Ultimately, we take this as a good sign—we are harder on our students than perhaps we should be. See Appendix 19i for more detail on validation measures.
consists of only two courses, not three, as in the other languages. Thus, we assessed French students on the basis of twenty weeks of instruction rather than thirty. Unsurprisingly, with less instruction their achievement in spoken and written French was lower than for students who had completed three courses.