



# Improving Proficiency Descriptors in the 21st Century: Incorporating Diversity, Equity and Inclusion

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# Proficiency Guidelines/Scales: Background

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- “Scales... create transparency and coherence” (North, 1993)
- “CEFR is a tool for reflection, communication and empowerment” (Trim, 2014)
- Can scales developed for monolingual learners be generalized to plurilingual learners? (Cox, Malone & Winke, 2018)
- “Scales and their accompanying tests and philosophies can provide washback to teaching and learning from curricula to classroom assessments, to student self-assessment” (Harsch & Malone, 2020)

# Who uses language proficiency scales?

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- U.S. Government
- Employers
- Universities
- K-12 schools

# Goals

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- Provide context for project
- Describe goals for revisions
- Explain process
- Discuss current findings
- Review next steps

# Context

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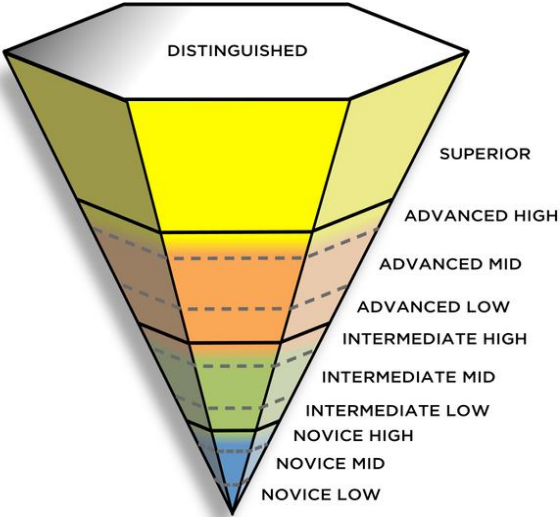
- About ACTFL
- Brief history of the Guidelines
- Reasons for revision

# ACTFL's Vision

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*ACTFL envisions an interconnected world where everyone benefits from and values a multilingual and multicultural education.*

# What We're Known For



WORLD-READINESS STANDARDS FOR LEARNING LANGUAGES			
GOAL AREA	Interpersonal Communication	Interpretive Communication	Presentational Communication
COMMUNICATION	Students interact and negotiate meaning in authentic tasks using the target language.	Students understand and interpret what they hear or read in order to achieve a specific purpose.	Students present information, ideas, and feelings in order to inform, persuade, or entertain others.
CULTURE	Students understand and appreciate the relationship between the practices and perspectives of the various cultures.	Students understand and appreciate the relationship between the practices and perspectives of the various cultures.	Students understand and appreciate the relationship between the practices and perspectives of the various cultures.
CONNECTIONS	Students establish and extend their knowledge of other languages using the knowledge of one language to aid in learning another.	Students use the language to investigate, explain, and reflect on the relationship between the practices and perspectives of the various cultures.	Students use the language to investigate, explain, and reflect on the relationship between the practices and perspectives of the various cultures.
COMPARISONS	Students compare and contrast the values, attitudes, and behaviors of the various cultures.	Students compare and contrast the values, attitudes, and behaviors of the various cultures.	Students compare and contrast the values, attitudes, and behaviors of the various cultures.
COMMUNITIES	Students participate in local and global communities using the target language.	Students participate in local and global communities using the target language.	Students participate in local and global communities using the target language.



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# ACTFL Strategic Plan

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**Advocacy & Outreach**

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**Diversity, Equity, & Inclusion**

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**Professional Learning**

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**Research**

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**Teacher Recruitment & Retention**



# ACTFL Proficiency Guidelines: Summary

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- A set of criteria describing five levels of language proficiency
- Independent of any textbook, curriculum, or sequence
- Used in academic, government, and business settings
- Includes four skills: listening, speaking, reading, and writing
- Basis for official ACTFL test development and ratings in over 120 languages
- Shared understanding of levels across languages

# ACTFL Proficiency Guidelines: History

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- Evolved from Interagency Language Roundtable (ILR SLDs)\*
- Released in 1986; revised in 1999 and 2012
- Revised to reflect lower levels of proficiency compared to government settings
- Genesis of ACTFL OPI® and accompanying tester preparation workshop and materials in 1982
- Basis for certified tests of speaking, listening, reading, and writing in multiple languages
  - Testers of speaking and writing certified by ACTFL
  - Testing suite articulated from Age 8 to adult

# K-12 Assessments

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# Post-Secondary/Beyond Assessments

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# Assessments cont.

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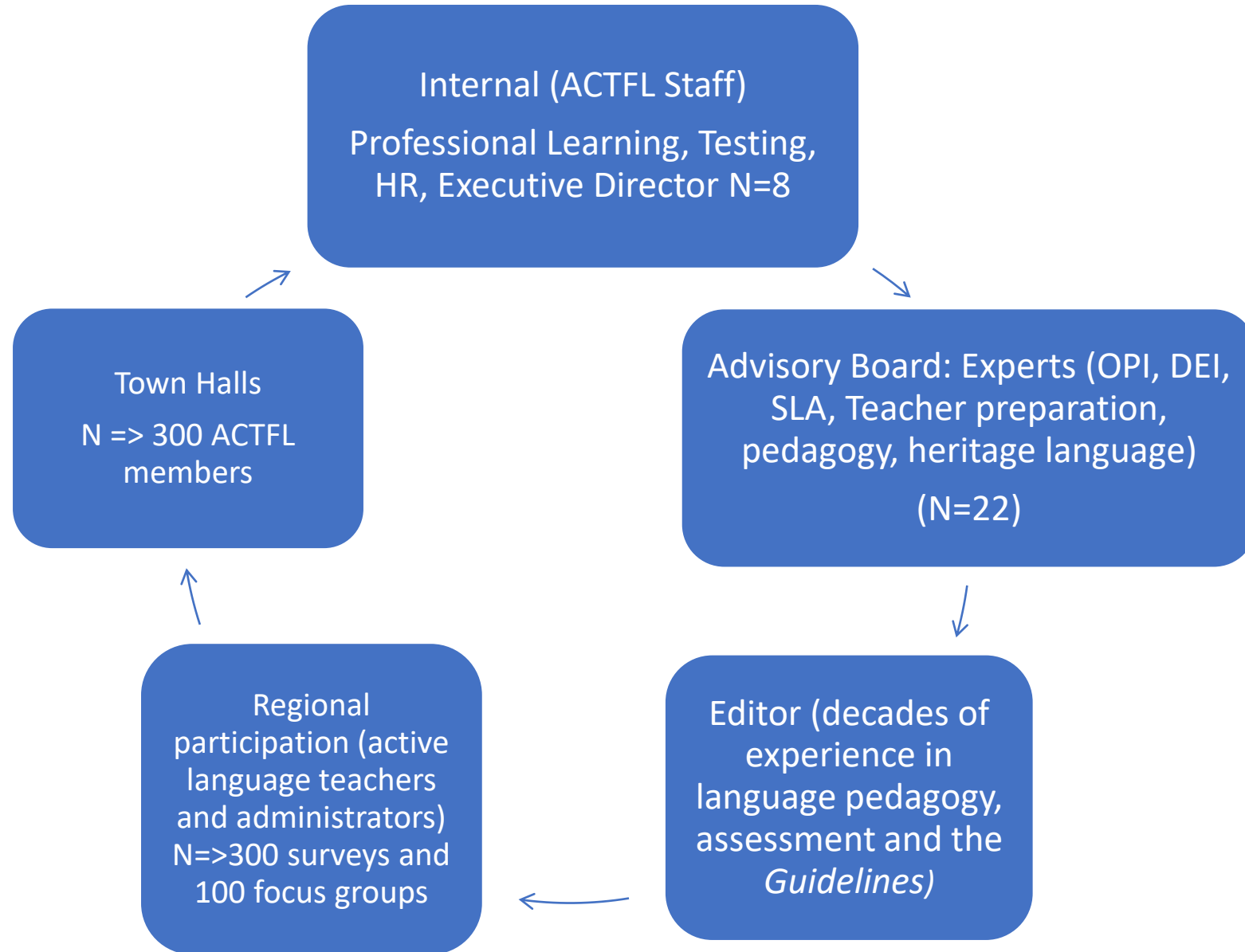


# Goals for Guidelines' Revision

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- Examine needs of general and specific audiences
  - Initially higher education/post-secondary
  - Now grades 3 – adult
- Examine and consider **ILR** descriptor process and outcomes
- Increase understanding and accessibility to wide audiences (teachers, administrators, testers) (Grapin & Lee, 2022)
- Identify language that is unwelcoming or inaccessible
- Revisit existing language and clarify structure, organization, message, and purpose
- Monitor vertical and horizontal progression (Berger, 2020)
- Emphasize ACTFL's strategic pillars
- Learn from others' experience (ILR SLDs)
- Align with ILR SLD revisions

# Process



# Behind the Process

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- Spring 2022 – Present
- Include a wide variety of stakeholders
  - Internal
  - Experts
    - Variety of languages and levels of experience (primary, middle, secondary, higher ed, other)
    - Certified ACTFL testers and facilitators
    - Experts in SLA, heritage language, diversity, equity and inclusion, language teacher preparation
  - Member Practitioners
    - Languages
    - Teaching levels
    - Familiarity with Guidelines



# Behind the process (continued)

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- Employ multiple methods of eliciting feedback
  - Meetings
  - Surveys
  - Interviews
  - Focus groups
- Follow an iterative process
- Incorporate feedback from different perspectives and expertise
  - Examined existing documents (ILR SLDs, World Readiness Standards for Learning Languages, ACTFL Performance Descriptors for Language Learners, NCSSFL-ACTFL Can-do Statements, prior versions of Guidelines)
- Utilize a professional editor: Deborah Kennedy

# Findings

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- Consensus on main issues across groups
  - Accessibility
  - Audience
  - Formatting
- Discussion
  - Length
  - Approach
  - Audience
- Inclusion
  - Appreciation for broad geographic reach
  - Discussion between and among members beyond staff and “experts”

# Quotes from pre-revision

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- *Consistent information and wording across (sub)levels. -Information parsed out and organized to make more digestible.*
- *In some places, extreme clarity and in others, unnecessarily long or redundant or unclear*
- ***De-center 'native'... Consider rewriting so that guidelines apply to all language users.***
- *Not accessible enough to give [learners, parents, administrators] a chance to engage*
- *Inclusive language, room for social justice, more application for classroom use (where “spontaneous real-world situations” are challenging to replicate)*

# Quotes from Focus Groups

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- *I really like the differentiation of [proficiency and performance] and how to assess. We have needed these changes for some time. This will greatly improve ACTFL workshop training experiences, materials, and much more for workshop participants.*
- *The revised wording is much more accessible to those who do not have a strong background in language acquisition. I often find that in training others in the guidelines, I have to simplify the language. This revision does that. I also like that there is a description of proficiency and performance, which is an important distinction to make.*

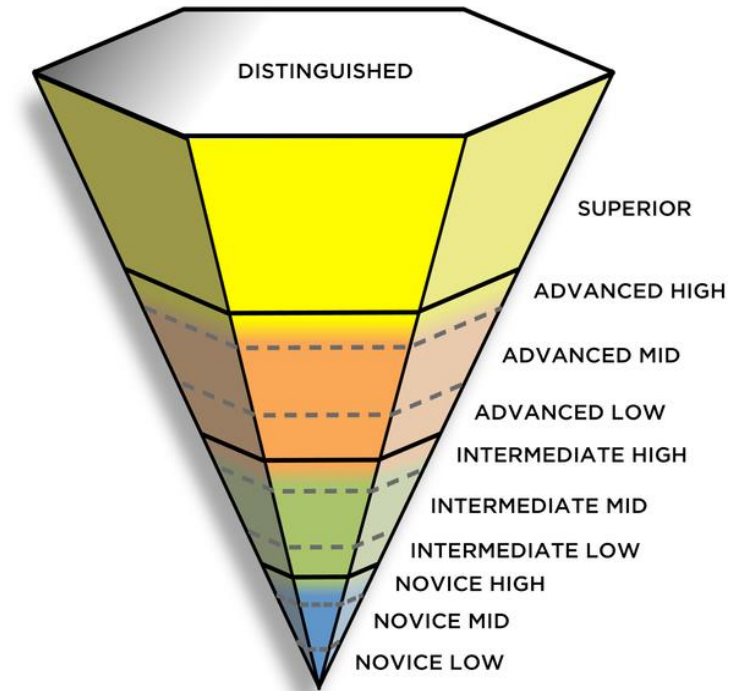
# Quotes from Town Halls

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- *Correlations with performance indicators are helpful*
- ***We love that “native” has been removed from the documents - the term can be too complicated for a doc like this***
- *Guidelines are more concise, but also clearer (descriptions are richer, which will help with evaluation)*
- *The effort to align the new guidelines with the Can-Do Statements is apparent and helps to bring specificity through examples*

# Issue: Superior and Distinguished

- Terms for highest levels of the *Guidelines*
- Infrequently attained in academic contexts
- Perceived as elitist/lofty: *superior does not give great vibes and neither does distinguished*
- [Many] already know what these terms mean, could require a lot of re-education.
- Suggestions:
  - Don't need both/no issue
  - Technical
  - Academic
  - Polished
  - Superlative
  - Expansive/extended
  - Accomplished
  - Professional
  - Expert
  - Specialist



# Findings to Date: Actions

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- Make wording consistent across levels and domains
- Need for more description and “fewer words”
  - Short overview for introduction
  - Use language/bullet points instead of sentences
- Emphasis on accessibility of language/clarity\*
  - Non-language educators/colleagues
  - Parents
  - Learners
- Questions on names for levels
  - Superior
  - Distinguished

# Findings to Date: Actions (continued)

- Alignment to and complement
  - *World Readiness Standards for Learning Languages*
  - *ACTFL Performance Descriptors for Language Learners*
  - *NCSSFL-ACTFL Can-do Statements*
- Eliminate exclusionary words
  - Native speaker\*
  - Target language/culture
  - “25 cent words” like “interlocutor”



# Conclusions

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- Transparency and inclusion
- Eliminate barriers to understanding
- Change the narrative regarding the “ideal” language learner/user
- ACTFL goal: to extend reach to non-experts!
  - Clarify communication

# Next Steps

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- Integrate all possible and practical ideas
- Elicit input from member educators using Guidelines in classroom settings
- Reveal at Town Halls and 2023 ACTFL Convention
- Release: April 2024

# Acknowledgements

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# Thank you!

