

Trends in Peace Corps volunteer language proficiency

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Background. The Peace Corps Act of 1981 stipulates that “[n]o person shall be assigned to duty as a Volunteer under this act in any foreign country unless at the time of such assignment the person possesses such reasonable proficiency as the assignment requires in speaking the language of the country or area to which the person is assigned” (Section 24). This paper investigates how “reasonable proficiency” in Peace Corps languages is measured via oral proficiency testing by examining trends in Peace Corps volunteer oral proficiency scores after preservice training and at the end of the two-year Peace Corps service.

The Peace Corps Language Testing Program supports language testing and training of language testers at Peace Corps posts worldwide. Each year, the program trains or retrains 80 to 120 language professionals (language teachers, language coordinators, and Peace Corps staff) to conduct the Peace Corps Language Proficiency Interview (PC LPI). The results of this interview demonstrate the oral proficiency attained by Peace Corps trainees and volunteers in more than sixty countries.

Program Description. From 1961 until 1969, the oral proficiency of Peace Corps trainees and volunteers was tested at close of preservice training by Foreign Service staff (or U.S.-based trainers), using the Language Proficiency Interview and rating according to the Interagency Language Roundtable (ILR) scale (Lowe 1988). During the 1960s, most language training took place in the United States. As the number of volunteers increased, and as training moved from sites in the United States to sites overseas, the Peace Corps recognized the need to internalize language testing systems (Rice 1982). Therefore, in 1969, a contract was awarded to Educational Testing Service (ETS) to manage training of testers at Peace Corps Training Centers overseas. ETS-trained testers at overseas and US-based training facilities and maintained a database of volunteer language scores.

In 1982, the provisional American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages (ACTFL) Guidelines were released. Unlike the ILR scale, the ACTFL Guidelines focused primarily on the lower levels of speaking proficiency. By the

late 1980s, the ACTFL Guidelines were in wide use in academia. Because trends showed that few Peace Corps volunteers achieved the highest levels on language proficiency on the ILR scale, and because of the focus on the lower ends of the scale, Peace Corps elected to shift from the ILR scale to the ACTFL scale (Anderson 1993). From 1989 to 1990, ACTFL tester trainers conducted sixty-one workshops to retrain previously certified testers and train new testers to use the ACTFL Guidelines in testing Peace Corps volunteers.

In 1996, Peace Corps–Washington instituted the position of language testing specialist at headquarters to integrate language testing into the language training program. In doing so, Peace Corps–Washington has emphasized the importance of testing in providing feedback on the efficacy of language training.

Timeline for Testing. Though each post approaches language testing slightly differently, testing usually occurs at specific points during training and service. All posts that test language proficiency do so at the end of the eight- to twelve-week preservice training that prepares volunteers for their Peace Corps service. At some posts, volunteers are also tested after one year of service and at close of service.

Trends in Peace Corps Testing. This part of the paper explores three types of trends in Peace Corps testing: reporting test scores from posts to Peace Corps–Washington, trends in proficiency attainment in major Peace Corps languages, and trends in proficiency attainment according to language difficulty.

Reporting trends. Because the language-testing program was incorporated into Peace Corps–headquarters fewer than three years ago, not all posts report proficiency scores regularly. Some trends are evident in score reporting, however. In the less commonly taught languages such as Bulgarian, Macedonian, Turkmen, and so on, posts were far more likely to report preservice training scores than mid- and close-of-service scores. Conversely, the commonly taught languages such as French, Russian, and Spanish had the highest rate of close of service scores reported.

These trends may reflect Peace Corps volunteers' perceptions of possible benefits of testing for their post-service careers. In the less commonly taught languages, emphasis is placed on language proficiency for Peace Corps service, perhaps because volunteers perceive little use for the language outside of the country of service. By contrast, post-service uses for the more commonly taught languages (French, Russian, and Spanish) are emphasized. This emphasis encourages volunteers to participate in oral proficiency testing at close of service. In addition to practical implications for individual returned volunteers, this emphasis allows Peace Corps–headquarters to track language gains during service.

Trends in proficiency attainment: Major languages. Trends in proficiency attainment were explored in French, Russian, and Spanish by investigating 465 pre- and post-service proficiency scores. All scores were entered into a Microsoft Excel database and means were computed. Table 1 shows the means for proficiency attainment in the three major languages.

The trends in Table 1 show that most volunteers are able to attain an ACTFL proficiency level of intermediate-low or better in the three most commonly taught languages by the end of preservice training. Since the intermediate-low level is considered characteristic of survival ability, this is considered adequate for most Peace Corps volunteers. Table 1 also indicates that volunteers achieve even higher levels of proficiency during their two years of service and leave Peace Corps with an intermediate-high or advanced level of proficiency. Since the advanced level is considered necessary for “most workplace interactions” (ACTFL Guidelines 1986), these data demonstrate that most volunteers are able to communicate in workplace settings in French and Spanish. Volunteers show slightly lower mean scores in Russian.

The slight difference in mean scores between Russian and the two Romance languages suggests that it may be more difficult to acquire higher levels of Russian language proficiency than French and Spanish. The next part of the data analysis investigates global differences between language proficiency scores at different levels of language proficiency.

Trends in proficiency attainment: Language difficulty categories. In addition to examining the data by major language categories, proficiency scores were also grouped by language difficulty categories. The Defense Language Institute has classified a number of languages according to relative difficulty of acquisition of a specific language by native speakers of English. Each language is classified according to four categories, with category 1 languages considered the least difficult

Table 1. Mean Scores: Major Languages

Language	Preservice ACTFL Score	End of Service ACTFL Score
Spanish	Intermediate-low/mid	Advanced
French	N/a	Advanced
Russian	Intermediate-low	Intermediate-high

Note: Countries included for Spanish are Chile, Costa Rica, Dominican Republic, Ecuador, Paraguay, Uruguay; for French, Benin, Burkina Faso, and Niger; and for Russian, Moldova, Russia, and Ukraine.

for native speakers of English to learn and category 4, the most difficult. Table 2 shows the results of an analysis of mean proficiency scores by the DLI's language difficulty classifications.

Table 2 shows the differences in proficiency levels at the end of preservice training and at close of service represented by the four language difficulty categories. Predictably, the highest scores are achieved in category 1 languages. One interesting difference can be found between close of service scores in category 2 and 3 languages. Volunteers showed scores approximately one ACTFL sublevel lower in category 2 languages than in category 3 languages, when the reverse would be predicted.

There are two possible explanations for the discrepancy. One is that most volunteers being tested in category 2 languages were teaching English as a foreign language in their host countries. It is possible that, because the primary work assignment of these volunteers involved speaking English, they had less opportunity to achieve higher levels of proficiency in the local language. In addition,

Table 2. Proficiency Scores by Language Difficulty Category

Language Category	Preservice ACTFL Proficiency Score	End of Service ACTFL Proficiency Score
Grade 1 (French, Spanish) (N= 359)	Intermediate low/mid	Advanced
Grade 2 (Estonian, Bulgarian, Romanian) (N= 84)	Intermediate low	Intermediate mid
Grade 3 (Latvian, Lithuanian, Berber, Nepali, Polish, Russian) N= 363	Novice-high/ intermediate-low	Intermediate high
Grade 4 (Arabic) N= 64	Intermediate low/mid	Intermediate high

Note: Countries included for Spanish are Chile, Costa Rica, Dominican Republic, Ecuador, Paraguay, Uruguay; for French, Benin, Burkina Faso, and Niger; for Latvian, Latvia; Lithuanian, Lithuania; Berber, Morocco; Nepali, Nepal; Polish, Poland; Russian, Moldova, Russia, and Ukraine; Arabic, Morocco.

based on recent experience in testing trends at the Foreign Service Institute, some language specialists at the Department of State have suggested that Estonian and Bulgarian should be reclassified as category 3 languages.

Future directions. This paper has examined trends in oral proficiency attained by Peace Corps volunteers at the end of eight to twelve weeks of preservice language training and gains made by the close of service two years later. The data show that, by end of preservice training, volunteers are able to attain at least a survival level of language proficiency, even in languages categorized as most difficult for native speakers. The data also show that most volunteers are able to achieve higher levels of proficiency, often increasing their score by two or more ACTFL sublevels, by close of service. The data also suggest that additional encouragement should be given to posts to promote oral proficiency testing in all languages at close of service.

These data are the first to examine trends in oral proficiency attainment by Peace Corps volunteers. Future studies will examine more closely the relationship between volunteers' assignments, age, and previous language background in attainment of oral proficiency.

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