




Writing Proficiency Profiles of Heritage Language Learners of Chinese

Alberta Gatti and Teresa O'Neill



The Graduate Center, CUNY
365 Fifth Avenue, Room 4415
New York, New York, 10016

 cilc.common.gc.cuny.edu  (212) 817 2082  cilc@gc.cuny.edu

 [@CILC_CUNY](https://twitter.com/CILC_CUNY)  [@cilc_lrc](https://www.instagram.com/cilc_lrc)  facebook.com/CILCCUNY

CILC is a national Language Resource Center funded by the U.S. Department of Education under a Title VI grant.

Center for Integrated Language Communities, 2020. This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-ShareAlike 4.0 International License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/).



Please cite as: Gatti, A. and O'Neill, T. (2020). *Writing Proficiency Profiles of Heritage Language Learners of Chinese*. Institute for Language Education in Transcultural Context, New York, NY.

WRITING PROFICIENCY PROFILES OF HERITAGE LANGUAGE LEARNERS OF CHINESE

OVERVIEW

The following material is informed by a research project conducted at the Center for Integrated Language Communities (CILC) from 2014 to 2018 with 61 heritage learners of Mandarin Chinese (henceforth “Chinese”). For this research, the definitions of writing proficiency were based on the American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages (ACTFL) Proficiency Guidelines 2012 – Writing. This study sought to address the following three research questions:

- 1) What are the strengths and weaknesses of writers at the Intermediate and Advanced levels of proficiency?
- 2) What prevents writers at the Intermediate and Advanced levels from consistently functioning at the next higher level of proficiency?
- 3) What are the implications of the proficiency profiles for instruction?

For full descriptions of profiles identified by the study, as well as for details on research methods and participants, please see Gatti, A. and O'Neill, T. (2017), Who Are Heritage Writers? Language Experiences and Writing Proficiency. *Foreign Language Annals*. 50: 734-753 and Gatti, A, O'Neill, T. (2018). Writing proficiency profiles of heritage learners of Chinese, Korean, and Spanish. *Foreign Language Annals*. 2018; 51: 719– 737.

WRITING PROFICIENCY

The ACTFL Proficiency Guidelines describe functional proficiency, i.e. what an individual can do with language “in real-world situations in a spontaneous and non-rehearsed context” (ACTFL Guidelines 2012 <https://www.actfl.org/publications/guidelines-and-manuals/actfl-proficiency-guidelines-2012>). The guidelines assess functional proficiency. When using them to assess writing with the Writing Proficiency Test (WPT), functional proficiency is gauged by documenting the writer’s ability to perform the functions belonging to the major levels (Novice, Intermediate, Advanced, or Superior)

- in specific context and content areas,
- with a level of comprehensibility and accuracy required by the functions,
- demonstrating control over a specific text type (sentence, paragraph, etc.).

For a description of the criteria at each major level, see pages 10-14 from https://www.actfl.org/sites/default/files/pdfs/public/ACTFLProficiencyGuidelines2012_FINAL.pdf

WHY IDENTIFY THE PROFICIENCY OF LEARNERS?

At any given point in time, a writer functions primarily within a specific proficiency level (Novice, Intermediate, Advanced, or Superior) with evidence of writing ability across a contiguous higher level. This is true for ALL writers, independently of how they have acquired the language; that is, independently of their categorization as native, heritage, or L2 writers of the language in question.

In the context of the language classroom, identifying proficiency levels ensures that learning goals, curriculum, and assessments:

- support linguistic development
- are appropriate to the abilities of the learners in a given class or program

SUPPORT OF LINGUISTIC DEVELOPMENT

A main goal of the proficiency-oriented classroom should be to help learners strengthen their abilities at one level and to progress to the next higher level of proficiency. Such movement will not take place if the learning goals, curriculum, and assessments are designed to work only within the learners' current proficiency level. For instance, Intermediate level writers, while broadening the context/content areas and expanding the text type of their writing at the Intermediate level, must also be focused on systematically targeting the functions and other assessment criteria of the Advanced level in order to develop and ultimately sustain Advanced level writing proficiency.

APPROPRIATENESS

Working to develop the next higher level of proficiency supports proficiency growth. However, working on criteria that are too far from a learner's current level (i.e., criteria that are two levels beyond the learner's current ability), might not, and will likely result in frustrated learners and instructors. While it is true that in scaffolded pedagogical environments, instructors can guide Intermediate level writers to work at the Superior level, in general, Intermediate learners should be working toward Advanced level learning goals. Otherwise, such learners are essentially being asked to do something they are not linguistically able to do yet. In other words, Intermediate learners who are asked to work on Superior level functions, contents/contexts, and text type will fail at the task because they lack control over the Advanced level criteria upon which moving into the Superior level rests. This scenario of setting unrealistic expectations for

learning outcomes is unfair to learners; it sets them up for failure and creates a situation of frustration for learners and instructors alike.

WHAT ABOUT HERITAGE LANGUAGE LEARNERS (HLLS)?

While the statements above are true for both L2 and HL learners, instructors who work with both populations immediately recognize that L2 learners and HLLs at the same level of proficiency may be linguistically and sociolinguistically different from each other. The goal of this guide is to highlight some of the particular ways in which HLLs perform at Intermediate and Advanced in order to support instructors and learners in the development of HL proficiency toward the next level.

READ MORE

For additional information on the use of the ACTFL Guidelines with HLLs, see:

ACTFL. (2017). ACTFL OPI Testing of Heritage Speakers. Unpublished manuscript

Kagan, O. (2005). In support of a proficiency-based definition of heritage language learners: The case of Russian. *The International Journal of Bilingual Education and Bilingualism*, 8(2&3), 212-21.

Martin, C. (2010). Assessing the oral proficiency of adult learners, “heritage” and “native” speakers using the ILR descriptions and ACTFL proficiency guidelines: Considering the Challenges. *Russian Language Journal/ Русский язык*, 60, 167–181.

Martin, C., Swender, E., & Rivera-Martinez, M. (2013). Assessing the oral proficiency of heritage speakers according to the ACTFL Proficiency Guidelines 2012–Speaking. *Heritage Language Journal*, 10(2), 73–87.

Swender, E., Martin, C. L., Rivera-Martinez, M., & Kagan, O. E. (2014). Exploring oral proficiency profiles of heritage speakers of Russian and Spanish. *Foreign Language Annals*, 47(3), 423–446.

WHAT ARE THE STRENGTHS AND WEAKNESSES OF INTERMEDIATE HERITAGE LANGUAGE WRITERS?

CRITERIA

The following tables reproduce the ACTFL descriptors for Intermediate and Advanced writing proficiency. Use them to understand what an Intermediate writer can do and what this writer needs to master to become an Advanced writer. We recommend you explore the complete publication of the ACTFL Guidelines 2012, available on the ACTFL site as well as the ACTFL Performance Descriptors for Language Learners <https://www.actfl.org/publications/guidelines-and-manuals/actfl-performance-descriptors-language-learners>.

<p>Writers at the Intermediate level are characterized by the ability to meet practical writing needs, such as simple messages and letters, requests for information, and notes. In addition, they can ask and respond to simple questions in writing. These writers can create with the language and communicate simple facts and ideas in a series of loosely connected sentences on topics of personal interest and social needs. They write primarily in present time. At this level, writers use basic vocabulary and structures to express meaning that is comprehensible to those accustomed to the writing of non-natives.</p> <p>https://www.actfl.org/publications/guidelines-and-manuals/actfl-proficiency-guidelines-2012/english/writing</p>	<p>Writers at the Advanced level are characterized by the ability to write routine informal and some formal correspondence, as well as narratives, descriptions, and summaries of a factual nature. They can narrate and describe in the major time frames of past, present, and future, using paraphrasing and elaboration to provide clarity. Advanced level writers produce connected discourse of paragraph length and structure. At this level, writers show good control of the most frequently used structures and generic vocabulary, allowing them to be understood by those unaccustomed to the writing of non-natives.</p> <p>https://www.actfl.org/publications/guidelines-and-manuals/actfl-proficiency-guidelines-2012/english/writing</p>
--	---

Find here a simplified rendition of the descriptors organized by the four assessment criteria: Functions, Context/Content, Accuracy/Comprehensibility, and Text Type. This table and the profiles that follow are designed to assist in identifying strengths and weaknesses of writers in support of specific pedagogical approaches and interventions. Always keep in mind that **proficiency is global, and all criteria develop interdependently—a writer moves to a higher proficiency level only by mastering all criteria (i.e., demonstrating the evidence to sustain all criteria across the topics and tasks of the level all the time).**

Criteria	Intermediate	Advanced
Functions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Writes simple messages and letters, requests for information, and notes ○ Asks and responds to simple questions in writing ○ Creates with the language 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Narrates and describes on topics of a factual nature in all major time frames
Context/Content	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Topics of personal interest and social needs 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Informal and some formal topics and contexts
Accuracy	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Basic vocabulary and structures ○ Comprehensible to those accustomed to the writing of non-natives 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Control of major time frames of past, present, and future ○ Control of the most frequently used structures and generic vocabulary ○ Understood by those unaccustomed to the writing of non-natives
Text Type	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Loosely connected sentences 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Connected discourse of paragraph length and structure

GENERAL CONSIDERATIONS

While considering the profiles that follow, keep in mind that:

- Proficiency is global, and all criteria develop interdependently—a writer moves to a higher proficiency level only by mastering all criteria (i.e., demonstrating the evidence to sustain all criteria across the topics and tasks of the level all the time).
- While the elements of proficiency cannot be taught or learned discretely, an understanding of the strengths and weaknesses of learners in discrete domains allows instructors to use **strengths** to scaffold and develop targeted activities to address specific **weaknesses**.
- Moving from one sublevel to the next may be a lengthy process; one semester might not be enough to observe such advancement, and as such, instructors and learners must set realistic expectations for both short term and long-term growth.
- Levels (with the exception of Superior) are divided in sublevels: Low (minimal performance at level), Mid (quantity and quality at level), and high (showing ability at the next major level, but unable to sustain it). The strengths and needs of learners at the different sublevels are diverse; and it follows that writers at the High sub-level attempting the functions of the next major level will show less **breakdown** than their Low and Mid counterparts. These writers might require less time to move to the next major level than their Low and Mid peers. Differentiated instruction—using, for example, an increasing complexity of writing prompts—is essential for a curriculum that is aligned with realistic and equitable goals for growth.

WHAT ARE THE STRENGTHS AND WEAKNESSES OF INTERMEDIATE HERITAGE MANDARIN CHINESE WRITERS WHEN THEY ATTEMPT ADVANCED LEVEL FUNCTIONS?

Criteria	Strengths	Weaknesses
Functions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ No breakdown when attempting factual narration 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Breakdown when attempting description on topics of general interest
Context/ Content		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Difficulty with moving beyond the autobiographical
Accuracy	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Control of the linguistic strategies needed to move between major timeframes ○ No lexical interference from English 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Deterioration in comprehensibility when moving beyond every day and autobiographical topics to topics of general interest ○ Lack of variety of connectors
Text Type		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Inability to craft texts at the paragraph level

For a more extensive discussion see Gatti, A. and O'Neill, T. (2018). Writing proficiency profiles of heritage learners of Chinese, Korean, and Spanish. *Foreign Language Annals*. 2018; 51: 719– 737.

FOR ALL ISSUES: Input is the key to linguistic development. Improvement of all of the identified issues requires rich input at the Advanced level. Selecting the appropriate input activities is key for the success of all pedagogical strategies in the context of linguistic development.

ISSUES: Difficulty with moving from familiar contexts (Intermediate) to contexts of general interest (Advanced)

CORRELATED ISSUE OF ACCURACY: Lack of vocabulary needed for writing about topics beyond familiar contexts

PEDAGOGICAL STRATEGY: Develop content-based and/or project-based courses that are organized around topics of general interest, so your HLLs get exposed to non-familiar contexts in a coherent and extended (semester-long) fashion.

ISSUE: Uneven performance in Advanced level functions (i.e., able to narrate in major timeframes, but unable to describe)

PEDAGOGICAL STRATEGY: Use some functions and context/content to scaffold the development of others. For instance, develop prompts that require practicing description (weakness) in the context of familiar topics (strength), and then use the practiced descriptive strategies to work with a topic of general interest.

ISSUE: Difficulty with producing paragraph-length text

CORRELATED ISSUE OF ACCURACY: Limited use of connective words and phrases

PEDAGOGICAL STRATEGIES:

- Scaffold text type development using activities that build paragraphs from the sentence level, where Intermediate writers are comfortable.
- Explicit instruction can help writers understand the difference between strings of sentences, skeletal paragraphs, and paragraphs.
- Paragraph composition benefits from increased time and opportunities to revise and use a variety of resources beyond those stored in memory.
- Provide learners with sample connective words and phrases they can use with working on assignments.

WHAT ARE THE STRENGTHS AND WEAKNESSES OF ADVANCED LEVEL HERITAGE LANGUAGE WRITERS?

CRITERIA

The following tables reproduce the ACTFL descriptors for Advanced and Superior writing proficiency. Use them to understand what an Advanced writer can do and what this writer needs to master to become a Superior writer. We recommend you explore the complete publication of the ACTFL Guidelines 2012, available on the ACTFL site as well as the ACTFL Performance Descriptors for Language Learners <https://www.actfl.org/publications/guidelines-and-manuals/actfl-performance-descriptors-language-learners>.

TABLE ON NEXT PAGE.

Writers at the **Advanced level** are characterized by the ability to write routine informal and some formal correspondence, as well as narratives, descriptions, and summaries of a factual nature. They can narrate and describe in the major time frames of past, present, and future, using paraphrasing and elaboration to provide clarity. Advanced level writers produce connected discourse of paragraph length and structure. At this level, writers show good control of the most frequently used structures and generic vocabulary, allowing them to be understood by those unaccustomed to the writing of non-natives.

<https://www.actfl.org/publications/guidelines-and-manuals/actfl-proficiency-guidelines-2012/english/writing>

Writers at the **Superior level** are able to produce most kinds of formal and informal correspondence, in-depth summaries, reports, and research papers on a variety of social, academic, and professional topics. Their treatment of these issues moves beyond the concrete to the abstract.

Writers at the Superior level demonstrate the ability to explain complex matters, and to present and support opinions by developing cogent arguments and hypotheses. Their treatment of the topic is enhanced by the effective use of structure, lexicon, and writing protocols. They organize and prioritize ideas to convey to the reader what is significant. The relationship among ideas is consistently clear, due to organizational and developmental principles (e.g., cause and effect, comparison, chronology). These writers are capable of extended treatment of a topic which typically requires at least a series of paragraphs but can extend to a number of pages.

Writers at the Superior level demonstrate a high degree of control of grammar and syntax, of both general and specialized/professional vocabulary, of spelling or symbol production, of cohesive devices, and of punctuation. Their vocabulary is precise and varied. Writers at this level direct their writing to their audiences; their writing fluency eases the reader's task.

Writers at the Superior level do not typically control target-language cultural, organizational, or stylistic patterns. At the Superior level, writers demonstrate no pattern of error; however, occasional errors may occur, particularly in low-frequency structures. When present, these errors do not interfere with comprehension, and they rarely distract the native reader.

<https://www.actfl.org/publications/guidelines-and-manuals/actfl-proficiency-guidelines-2012/english/writing>

Find here a simplified rendition of the descriptors organized by the four assessment criteria: Functions, Context/Content, Accuracy/Comprehensibility, and Text Type. This table and the profiles that follow are designed to assist in identifying strengths and weaknesses of writers in support of specific pedagogical approaches and interventions. Always keep in mind that **proficiency is global, and all criteria develop interdependently—a writer moves to a higher proficiency level only by mastering all criteria (i.e., demonstrating the evidence to sustain all criteria across the topics and tasks of the level all the time).**

Criteria	Advanced	Superior
Functions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Narrates and describes on topics of a factual nature in all major time frames 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Explains complex matters ○ Presents and supports opinions by developing cogent arguments and hypotheses ○ Able to treat issues abstractly
Context/ Content	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Informal and some formal topics and contexts 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Most kinds of formal and informal correspondence ○ In-depth summaries, reports, and research papers on a variety of social, academic, and professional topics
Accuracy	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Control of major time frames of past, present, and future ○ Control of the most frequently used structures and generic vocabulary ○ Understood by those unaccustomed to the writing of non-natives 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Effective use of structure, lexicon, and writing protocols ○ High degree of control of grammar and syntax ○ High degree of control of spelling or symbol production, of cohesive devices, and of punctuation ○ Precise and varied vocabulary ○ No pattern of error
Text Type	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Connected discourse of paragraph length and structure 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Extended discourse

GENERAL CONSIDERATIONS

While considering the profiles that follow, keep in mind that:

- Proficiency is global, and all criteria develop interdependently—a writer moves to a higher proficiency level only by mastering all criteria (i.e., demonstrating the evidence to sustain all criteria across the topics and tasks of the level all the time).
- While the elements of proficiency cannot be taught or learned discretely, an understanding of the strengths and weaknesses of learners in discrete domains allows instructors to use **strengths** to scaffold and develop targeted activities to address specific **weaknesses**.
- Moving from one sublevel to the next may be a lengthy process; one semester might not be enough to observe such advancement, and as such, instructors and learners must set realistic expectations for both short term and long-term growth.
- Levels (with the exception of Superior) are divided in sublevels: Low (minimal performance at level), Mid (quantity and quality at level), and high (showing ability at the next major level, but unable to sustain it). The strengths and needs of learners at the different sublevels are diverse; and it follows that writers at the High sub-level attempting the functions of the next major level will show less **breakdown** than their Low and Mid counterparts. These writers might require less time to move to the next major level than their Low and Mid peers. Differentiated instruction—using, for example, an increasing complexity of writing prompts—is essential for a curriculum that is aligned with realistic and equitable goals for growth.

WHAT ARE THE STRENGTHS AND WEAKNESSES OF ADVANCED HERITAGE MANDARIN CHINESE WRITERS WHEN THEY ATTEMPT SUPERIOR LEVEL FUNCTIONS?

Criteria	Strengths	Weaknesses
Functions		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Signs of <u>breakdown</u> when attempting to explain complex matters in detail ○ Unable to treat issues abstractly ○ Unable to present and support opinions by developing cogent arguments and hypotheses
Context/ Content	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Writing about social, professional, and academic topics 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Formal writing
Accuracy	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ No interference from English 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Lack of precise vocabulary ○ Problems with accuracy in linguistic features and orthography ○ Lack of appropriate connective devices ○ Reliance on the style of oral discourse
Text Type		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Struggle with <u>extended discourse</u>

For a more extensive discussion see Gatti, A. and O'Neill, T. (2018). Writing proficiency profiles of heritage learners of Chinese, Korean, and Spanish. *Foreign Language Annals*. 2018; 51: 719– 737.

FOR ALL ISSUES: Input is the key to linguistic development. Improvement of all of the identified issues will require rich input at the Superior level. Selecting the appropriate input activities is key for the success of all pedagogical strategies in the context of linguistic development.

ISSUE: Lack of control of the Superior level-functions

PEDAGOGICAL STRATEGIES: Combine explicit instruction (i.e. how to structure presentation and support of opinions, the difference between concrete and abstract treatment of issues), with a wealth of examples (input). For practice, start with using Superior level functions on contexts/content that are familiar to your learners, and once they are comfortable using the functions in these contexts, proceed to the formal sphere. In preparation for this more demanding task, the formal contexts should be introduced beforehand through input.

ISSUE: Inconsistency in error type and frequency (as expected as part of a developmental process)

PEDAGOGICAL STRATEGIES: Expose learners to input.

ISSUE: Mechanical errors (e.g., norms for spelling, punctuation, and diacritic/accent marks)

PEDAGOGICAL STRATEGIES: Teach writers to use the electronic tools available to them (spellcheck, grammar check), and help them learn to discern when these tools are helpful and how to assess the validity of their suggestions.

ISSUE: Inability to produce Superior level text type, which consists of extended discourse.

PEDAGOGICAL STRATEGIES: Some level of explicit instruction will help writers understand the difference between different text types (e.g., skeletal paragraph, paragraph, extended discourse). To practice, provide a paragraph for writers to flesh out into extended discourse. Beyond this, the ability to produce extended discourse relies heavily on full development of the other criteria, as well as nuanced knowledge of the subject matter of the writing task. We hypothesize that a massive amount of targeted input (and time) will be required for writers to move successfully from producing paragraphs to producing extended discourse.