

What Returned Missionary Language Course Should I Enroll In?

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How long does it take to learn a language?

What's the hardest language to learn?

As someone who does research in language testing as well as self-assessment, I am often asked for recommendations on what language class students should enroll in. The short answer is, it depends. How much do you have to learn?

Languages vary in many ways including grammatical patterns, sound systems, writing systems, culture, vocabulary, etc. Those languages that share similar characteristics will take less time to learn than languages that vary more. Thus, an English-speaker learning Spanish will take less time to become proficient than an English-speaker learning Chinese. Fortunately, the US government has data from its language schools and has put languages into classification levels by how different the language is from English.

So, what course should you sign up for?

Please complete the following sections based on your language experience:

- Language Learner Characteristics
- Language Exposure(Time Immersed in Target Language)
- Language Proficiency Self-Assessment

After you have completed those sections, you will use those results in the **Course Level Recommendation Section**.

Good luck!

- *The more there is to learn, the longer it will take.*

—Ray Clifford

Language Learner Characteristics

1. Answer the language learner background questions in Table 1.
2. Add up the total number of YES responses.
3. Write that number: _____

Example 1: I grew up speaking English, but studied Spanish in Elementary school and high school and have gone to Spanish-speaking countries with my family and on a humanitarian EFY. I was always one of the better language students in my Spanish class. I was called to a Tagalog-speaking mission, and I worked hard on my language the entire time I was there. I made specific goals and studied language every day. I would answer YES to questions 2-6 and give myself a score of 5.

Example 2: I grew up speaking English. I started Spanish in Junior High, but didn't like it, wasn't very good at it, and didn't continue. I was called to a Tagalog-speaking mission, and I worked hard in the MTC and studied in the field until I got good enough to be understood. Often, I'd use the language study time for district meetings, further gospel study or other things. I would answer NO to questions 1, 2, 3 and 4. For questions 5 and 6, I did for part of my mission, so I think I'll give myself a score of 1.

Table 1. Language Learner Background Questions

Question	Yes	No
Did you grow up speaking more than one language?		
Have you formally studied a language in school for more than 2 years?		
Do you already speak two or more languages?		
Are you naturally-talented at learning languages?		
Were you consciously and consistently improving your language through finding authentic input, speaking and writing regularly, seeking feedback and incorporating it the entire time?		
Did you use the time allocated by the missionary department to study the language every day for the entire time you were there?		
Total		

Language Exposure (Time Immersed in Target Language)

1. Refer to Appendix A to find the language classification of the language you learned or were learning on your mission.
2. Determine the number of months you lived in an immersion environment.

a. *Missionaries serving foreign language missions abroad*
Language immersion while abroad can vary greatly.
The most linguistically rich immersion environments are when missionaries serve with native companions in a place where the foreign language is spoken.
But simply living abroad is not a guarantee that missionaries will be immersed in the language. It is quite possible to go to a foreign mission, but speak English most of the time. For instance, a missionary serving in northern Europe or Polynesia may find in the big cities that many of the people speak English quite well and that might be the default language for a lot of communication. If you are serving with English-speakers as companions or in districts, English will likely be used more often as well.
Most missionaries fall in a range between these two extremes. Try and realistically determine your amount of exposure and time speaking the language.

b. *Missionaries serving foreign language missions in an English-speaking country (e.g. the US, Canada, etc.)*
This is highly dependent on each mission and the number of areas in which the language is exclusively used.
Some missionaries have native speaking companions, spend all of their time working in the language and live in environments where they can shop and spend most of their time in the language. This is rare, however, professors in the Spanish Department have noted that some of their best students have served stateside so time is only one factor and can be mediated by *Language Learner Characteristics*.
More often missionaries serving stateside use the language bilingually and switch back and forth between the languages throughout the mission (e.g. English when speaking to the children of people they are teaching, a transfer to an English-speaking area, or a leadership calling (ZL, STL) that requires English, etc.). A language baseline study by the MTC found that Spanish-speaking missionaries serving in the United States took over twice as long to reach Advanced as their counterparts serving in Latin America and Spain. Carefully determine the amount of time spent immersed in the language (including serving with native speaking companions) to calculate your total number of months.
3. Refer to Table 2 and find the *Language Classification* in the row and then find the number of *Months Living in Immersion* in the column.
4. Circle your course recommendation: Beginning Intermediate Advanced

Example: I served for 12 months in a Tagalog-speaking Mission in the Philippines. The Language Classification of Tagalog in Appendix A is 4.

Course recommendation: Beginning Intermediate Advanced

Table 2. Time to Learn Language by Classification

		Months Living in Immersion Environment					
		3 mos.	6 mos	9 mos	12 mos	15 mos	18+ mos
Language Classification	1	Intermediate	Intermediate	Advanced	Advanced	Advanced	Advanced
	2	Intermediate	Intermediate	Intermediate	Advanced	Advanced	Advanced
	3	Beginning	Intermediate	Intermediate	Intermediate	Advanced	Advanced

4	Beginning	Intermediate	Intermediate	Intermediate	Intermediate	Advanced
5	Beginning	Intermediate	Intermediate	Intermediate	Intermediate	Inter/Adv

Note: The chart indicates the number of months that the average missionary needs be ready for a given class level. Some missionaries will be ready sooner than this recommendation, and some will take even longer depending on the quality of exposure and the *Language Learner Characteristics*

Language Proficiency Self-Assessment

1. Refer to *Language Characteristics by Proficiency* (Table 3) below.
2. In each row, mark the box that best describes your unrehearsed speaking ability in the language you have learned or are learning.
3. Count how many checks are in each column.
4. Write the total in the last row.
5. The column with the most checks will be your course recommendation.
6. Circle your course recommendation: Beginning Intermediate Advanced

Example: I served a Tagalog-speaking mission. I have 2 checks in the Intermediate column and 5 checks in the Advanced column. Course recommendation: Beginning Intermediate Advanced

Table 3. Language Characteristics by Proficiency Level

Language	Beginning (ACTFL Novice)	Intermediate (ACTFL Intermediate)	Advanced (ACTFL Advanced)
Complexity of my communication exchanges	<input type="checkbox"/> I can say words and phrases.	<input type="checkbox"/> I can create new sentences to meet my needs within familiar settings.	<input type="checkbox"/> I can narrate in past, present, and future time frames & give multi-paragraph descriptions of people, places, things, and relationships.
My spontaneity	<input type="checkbox"/> I use memorized language in my responses to questions.	<input type="checkbox"/> I apply semi-rehearsed language skills within familiar settings.	<input type="checkbox"/> I solve new, unanticipated, real-world communication needs though lengthy narration, description, and cohesive explanations.
Accuracy of the language I produce	<input type="checkbox"/> I am often not understood.	<input type="checkbox"/> I am understood by those who are accustomed to learner speech & writing.	<input type="checkbox"/> I am understood by those who are NOT accustomed to language learner speech & writing.
My self-monitoring ability	<input type="checkbox"/> I don't recognize when I have made a mistake.	<input type="checkbox"/> I usually know when there are communication failures, but not necessarily why.	<input type="checkbox"/> I usually recognize my mistakes as they occur and can restate or repair errors when necessary.
The topics and cultural content I have mastered	<input type="checkbox"/> I know enough to successfully negotiate typical tourist survival situations.	<input type="checkbox"/> I participate in common, high-frequency daily activities	<input type="checkbox"/> I comprehend and discuss news, current events, general work activities, and popular media.
My supporting knowledge	<input type="checkbox"/> I know the English meanings of high-frequency foreign words.	<input type="checkbox"/> I know the grammar, vocabulary, pronunciation, writing system, and culture needed to understand and produce accurate sentences.	<input type="checkbox"/> I know the grammar, vocabulary, pronunciation, writing system, and culture needed to accurately understand and produce reports, detailed descriptions, and lengthy stories.
Breadth of my active vocabulary	<input type="checkbox"/> ≈ 200 words	<input type="checkbox"/> ≈ 1,000 words	<input type="checkbox"/> ≈ 5,000 words

Totals			
Clifford, Ray (2020). <i>Which course should I take?</i> Personal Communication. March 24, 2020			

The following recommendations are based on the American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages (ACTFL) proficiency guidelines and the assumption that in most language classes:

- Beginning Classes (100 Level) align with ACTFL Novice,
- Intermediate Classes (200 Level) align with ACTFL Intermediate, and
- Advanced Classes (300 Level) align with ACTFL Advanced.

Course Level Recommendation

Most departments/organizations allow students to choose the course they want to take, so we can only give you advice. As stated in the beginning, the more there is to learn, the longer it takes, and language learning might not happen automatically. We all know people who have lived in a country for years and still speak a “broken” form of the language. They learn enough to get by and then stop progressing. As my colleague Ray likes to say, “Language is like air. You don’t even notice it unless there’s something wrong.” So, if you are relying on the compliments people have given you on how well you speak, it means they are noticing your language. You should be cautious if you assume there are no areas that you can improve in.

There are other people who never visit the country where the language is spoken and sound native-like. I often tell people the adage, “Hard work beats talent when talent won’t work hard.” But that development often takes time, so even those who work hard need on their language study need to do it over a long period to see movement into the advanced levels. Those who are deliberate and constantly trying to improve in their language study typically do better than those that don’t think about it at all

Complete the following section to find your recommended course level.

1. Write your numeric total and circle the course recommendations from the previous sections into a, b, and c:

a. Language Learner Characteristic Total	____/6			
b. Language Exposure:	Beginning	Intermediate	Advanced	
c. Language Proficiency Self-Assessment:	Beginning	Intermediate	Advanced	
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d. Final Course Recommendation:	Beginning	Intermediate	Advanced	
2. If your course recommendations for **Language Exposure** and **Language Proficiency Self-Assessment**
 - a. Are the same, circle that recommendation for 1.d. **Final Course Recommendation**
 - b. Are different, look **Language Learner Characteristic Total**
 - i. If it is 3 or lower, circle the lower recommendation 1.d. **Final Course Recommendation**.
 - ii. If it is 4 or higher, you *might* be okay in the higher level. Circle that recommendation in 1.d. **Final Course Recommendation**
3. Look at 1.d. **Final Course Recommendation** and go to Appendix B to find the exact course number for the class you should sign up for. Please note that different departments might have different recommendations.

Example 1: I served for 12 months in a Tagalog-speaking Mission in the Philippines. I sign up for Tagalog 330.

a. Language Learner Characteristic Total	__5__ /6			
b. Language Exposure:	Beginning	Intermediate	Advanced	
c. Language Proficiency Self-Assessment:	Beginning	Intermediate	Advanced	
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Final Course Recommendation:	Beginning	Intermediate	Advanced	

Example 2: I served for 12 months in a Tagalog-speaking Mission in the Philippines. I sign up for Tagalog 202.

a. Language Learner Characteristic Total	__1__ / 6		
b. Language Exposure:	Beginning	Intermediate	Advanced
c. Language Proficiency Self-Assessment:	Beginning	Intermediate	Advanced
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Final Course Recommendation:	Beginning	Intermediate	Advanced

Appendix A: Language Classification

Language	Classification	Language	Classification
Afrikaans	1	Lao	4
Albanian	4	Latvian	4
Arabic	5	Lithuanian	4
Armenian	4	Malagasy	*4
Bulgarian	4	Malay	3
Burmese	4	Marshallese	*4
Cambodian (Khmer)	4	Mongolian	4
Cebuano	*4	Navajo	*4
Chinese (Cantonese)	5	Norwegian	1
Chinese (Mandarin)	5	Persian (Dari,	4
Creole (Haitian)	*1	Polish	4
Croatian	4	Portuguese	1
Czech	4	Quechua	*4
Danish	1	Romanian	1
Dutch	1	Russian	4
Estonian	4	Samoan	*4
Fijian	*4	Serbian	4
Finnish	4	Slovak	4
French	1	Slovenian	4
Georgian	4	Spanish	1
German	2	Swahili	3
Greek	4	Swedish	1
Guarani	*4	Tagalog	4
Hawaiian	*4	Tahitian	*4
Hiligaynon	4	Thai	4
Hindi	4	Tongan	*4
Hmong	*4	Turkish	4
Hungarian	4	Ukrainian	4
Icelandic	4	Vietnamese	4
Indonesian	3	Welsh	*4
Italian	1	Vietnamese	4
Japanese	5		
Kekchi	4		
Kiribati	4		
Korean	5		

* Not taught in the government language schools so classification might be easier or harder.

Appendix B: Language Course Recommendations

Language	Department Offering Course	Course Code	Beginning Level	Intermediate Level	Advanced Level
Afrikaans	Center for Language Studies	AFRIK	101, 102	201	N/A
Albanian	Center for Language Studies	ALBAN	N/A	N/A	330
Armenian	Center for Language Studies	ARMEN	N/A	N/A	330
Bulgarian	Center for Language Studies	BULG	N/A	N/A	330
Burmese	Center for Language Studies	BURMS	N/A	N/A	330
Cambodian (Khmer)	Center for Language Studies	CAMBO	N/A	N/A	330
Cebuano	Center for Language Studies	CEBU	N/A	N/A	330
Chinese (Cantonese)	Asian & Near Eastern Lang	CANT	101, 102	201, 202	N/A
Chinese (Mandarin)	Asian & Near Eastern Lang	CHIN	101, 102	201	202
Creole (Haitian)	Center for Language Studies	CREOL	101, 102	201	330
Croatian	Center for Language Studies	CROAT	N/A	N/A	330
Czech	Center for Language Studies	CZECH	N/A	N/A	330
Danish	Comparative Arts and Letter	DANSH	101, 102	N/A	321
Dutch	Center for Language Studies	DUTCH	N/A	N/A	330
Estonian	Center for Language Studies	ESTON	N/A	N/A	330
Fijian	Center for Language Studies	FIJI	N/A	N/A	330
Finnish	Comparative Arts and Letter	FINN	101, 102	N/A	321
French	French & Italian	FREN	101, 102	201, 202	321
Georgian	Center for Language Studies	GEORG	N/A	N/A	330
German	German & Russian	GERM	101, 102	201, 202	330
Guarani	Center for Language Studies	GUARA	N/A	N/A	330
Hawaiian	Center for Language Studies	HAWAI	101, 102	201, 202	N/A
Hiligaynon	Center for Language Studies	HILIG	N/A	N/A	330
Hindi	Center for Language Studies	HINDI	101, 102	201, 202	330
Hmong	Center for Language Studies	HMONG	N/A	N/A	330
Hungarian	Center for Language Studies	HUNG	N/A	N/A	330
Indonesian	Center for Language Studies	INDON	N/A	N/A	330
Italian	French & Italian	ITAL	101, 102	201, 202	321
Japanese	Asian & Near Eastern Lang	JAPAN	101, 102	201, 202	301
Kekchi	Center for Language Studies	FLANG 330-KEKCHI	N/A	N/A	330
K'iche	Center for Language Studies	KICHE	101, 102	201, 202	N/A
Kiribati	Center for Language Studies	KIRIB	N/A	N/A	330
Korean	Asian & Near Eastern Lang	KOREA	101, 102	201, 202	301
Lao	Center for Language Studies	LAO	N/A	N/A	330
Latvian	Center for Language Studies	LATVI	N/A	N/A	330
Lithuanian	Center for Language Studies	LITHU	N/A	N/A	330
Malagasy	Center for Language Studies	MALAG	N/A	N/A	330
Malay	Center for Language Studies	MALAY	N/A	N/A	330
Marshallse	Center for Language Studies	MARSH	N/A	N/A	330
Mongolian	Center for Language Studies	MONGO	N/A	N/A	330
Navajo	Center for Language Studies	NAVAJ	101, 102	201	N/A
Norwegian	Comparative Arts and Letter	NORWE	101, 102	201, 202	321
Persian	Center for Language Studies	PERSI	101, 102	N/A	330
Polish	Center for Language Studies	POLSH	N/A	N/A	330

Portuguese	Spanish & Portuguese	PORT	101/105	201/205	321
Quechua	Center for Language Studies	QUECH	101, 102	N/A	305
Romanian	Center for Language Studies	ROM	N/A	N/A	330
Russian	German & Russian	RUSS	101, 102	201, 202	330
Samoan	Center for Language Studies	SAMOA	101, 102	201, 202	330
Serbian	Center for Language Studies	SRBIA	N/A	N/A	330
Slovak	Center for Language Studies	SLOVK	N/A	N/A	330
Slovenian	Center for Language Studies	SLN	N/A	N/A	330
Spanish	Spanish & Portuguese	SPAN	101, 102, 105, 106	205, 206	321
Swahili	Center for Language Studies	SWAHI	101, 102	N/A	N/A
Swedish	Comparative Arts and Letter	SWED	101, 102	201, 202	321
Tagalog	Center for Language Studies	TAGAL	101, 102	201, 202	330
Tahitian	Center for Language Studies	TAHTN	N/A	N/A	202
Thai	Center for Language Studies	THAI	101.102	N/A	330
Tongan	Center for Language Studies	TONGA	101, 102	201, 202	330
Turkish	Center for Language Studies	TURK	101, 102	N/A	330
Ukrainian	Center for Language Studies	UKRAI	N/A	N/A	330
Vietnamese	Center for Language Studies	VIET	N/A	N/A	330
Welch	Center for Language Studies	WELCH	101, 102	201, 202	N/A

N/A=Contact Department Responsible and Request it be Taught

Department	Phone	Email	Website
Asian & Near Eastern Languages	801-422-3396	anel@byu.edu	https://ane.byu.edu/
Center for Language Studies	801-422-1201	cls@byu.edu	http://cls.byu.edu/
Comparative Art & Letters	801-4224448	cal-pt@byu.edu	https://cal.byu.edu/
French & Italian	801-422-2209	french_italian@byu.edu	https://frenchitalian.byu.edu/
German & Russian	801-422-4923	germ-list@byu.edu	https://germanrussian.byu.edu/
Spanish & Portuguese	801-422-2837	span-port@byu.edu	https://spanport.byu.edu/