

# Language Pathways: Connecting Heritage Learners to Federal Careers

## Episode 5: The Interagency Language Roundtable (ILR) Scale

[Intro music]

**Mathilda Reckford:** Are you a learner of Arabic, Chinese, Korean, Persian, or Russian? Do you have a connection to these languages through your family or community? This is the podcast for you!

Hello, and welcome to [00:30] Language Pathways: Connecting Heritage Learners to Federal Careers. We believe in the power of multilingualism, and in this podcast series we'll discuss how your language skills can help you get hired and work successfully in the federal government. By sharing experiences that link language study to federal careers, we'll teach you how to leverage your language skills to get a fulfilling job.

I'm your host, Mathilda Reckford. Have you ever wondered how U.S. government jobs evaluate their employees and future employees on their language skills? In this episode we're going to [01:00] talk about the Interagency Language Roundtable scale, commonly known as the ILR scale.

The ILR scale is used widely throughout the federal government to determine employees' levels of proficiency in a language, making it important to understand the scale and how it is used if you are interested in pursuing a federal job. The ILR scale ranges from levels 0 to 5, with "plus" levels as well, so 0+, 1+ etc., and it can be used to assess language users on the four skills of [01:30] listening, reading, speaking, and writing.

Our guests today are DeAnna Coon and Dr. Laura Fyfe. DeAnna Coon is the ILR Program Manager on the Contracts and Compliance team at the American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages, commonly known as ACTFL. She manages contracts for various government agencies seeking proficiency testing on the ILR scale.

Dr. Laura Fyfe is a Course Design Specialist at the Foreign Service Institute's Language Program Design branch. She is a former French professor, study abroad director, [02:00] and language program supervisor for French and less commonly taught European and African languages.

[Transition music]

Thank you so much for joining us and let's get started. Can you tell us a little bit about what you do?

**Laura Fyfe:** I work at the Foreign Service Institute, which is the training branch of the U.S. State Department, and I assist in the development and [02:30] updating of curricula for our 50-plus language programs. Over the past year, I've been researching heritage language learning in the U.S., and I was lucky to have taken training with the National Heritage Language Resource Center at UCLA and recently compiled a micro-learning site on heritage language learning for students and staff at the State Department.

**DeAnna Coon:** As the ILR program manager at ACTFL, my job [03:00] involves managing government contracts for language testing on the ILR proficiency scale. I work with both the OPI testers – those are the oral proficiency testers on the ILR scale and our government clients to ensure high quality proficiency testing for the government agencies' goals and objectives.

**Mathilda:** Can you tell us what the ILR proficiency scale is and why it was developed [03:30] and how it was developed?

**Laura:** So the ILR stands for the Interagency Language Roundtable. It's a proficiency scale used in the U.S. government. It's a framework or rubric for assessing language proficiency. It was established first at FSI in 1956 and then adopted amongst U.S. agencies in 1968. The ACTFL scale [04:00] was based upon it. And it also inspired the CEFR, the Common European Framework.

**DeAnna:** It was actually developed and refined over several decades, starting in about the 1950s through the 1980s, with the objective of defining and measuring foreign language skills of government employees. It was actually developed because they needed an objective way to measure what employees were [04:30] self-reporting in terms of their language proficiency. So obviously employees, some employees tended to overrate their skills and others tended to underrate their skills. So they wanted to have a way to actually measure what these employees could do with their foreign language in terms of matching them with appropriate positions.

**Mathilda:** How many proficiency levels are in the ILR proficiency scale and how is the scale organized? [05:00]

**DeAnna:** So the ILR scale actually has six base levels, which start at 0, which is no proficiency, and go up to a level 5. So levels 0 through 4 are also complemented by plus levels, giving us a total of 11 possible ratings or levels on the scale.

**Mathilda:** What skills are included in the ILR proficiency scale and what type of information is provided in the proficiency level descriptions for each skill? [05:30]

**Laura:** So the ILR scale is broken down into speaking, reading, listening, and writing - the four skills. For the State Department, we only use speaking and reading. So our diplomats need to be able to speak about daily life and professional topics, demonstrate listening and reading

comprehension skills. You'll find if you want to look at the skill level descriptors, they're on the ILR website at [06:00] [govtilr.org](http://govtilr.org). The skill level descriptions provide information about the expectations for the given score assigned, and they describe four aspects of language proficiency. First, the functional ability, which refers to communicative tasks that an individual can accomplish. Precision of forms is the second, it refers to accuracy, range, and complexity. [06:30] Content meaningfulness, which refers to relevance and substantive coverage of topics, and contextual appropriateness, which covers register, acceptability, appropriateness of language for the intended audience.

**DeAnna:** The descriptors are grounded in language tasks, which basically means what an examinee can do with their language. And these tasks are situated by the interviewer [07:00] into different contexts, which can be either social, academic, professional, they might be formal situations or informal situations – or contexts as we refer to them.

The descriptors also refer to a speaker's accuracy, which includes elements of structural control or what we think of or usually refer to as grammar, pronunciation, and also vocabulary use. [07:30] Text type is also considered which broadly means length of speech that can range from words, to phrases, to sentences, to paragraphs. And they also refer to organization, so the organization of language and also how well ideas are connected in an examinee's communication.

**Mathilda:** So if you know a little bit about your proficiency on the ACTFL scale, how can you learn more about where you might be on the ILR scale [08:00] for those government jobs?

**DeAnna:** So the ACTFL scale and the ILR scale - those two scales do not perfectly align. The reason being that the ACTFL scale is more what I refer to as granular. It has more sublevels than the ILR scale. So for example, the ACTFL scale recognizes the Novice level so that indicates [08:30] that the speaker does have some ability to produce some utterances. But the ILR scale doesn't really acknowledge that as any sort of language production until level 0+, which is the equivalent of the ACTFL Novice High.

So they don't start exactly in the same place. But then after that, the ACTFL Intermediate levels [09:00] very broadly correspond to ILR level 1. And the Advanced levels very broadly are equivalent to level 2 on the ILR scale, and then Superior would be considered equivalent to ILR level 3. And then of course the ILR scale does go on higher than the ACTFL scale.

**Mathilda:** And what [09:30] ILR levels are typically required for different jobs in the federal government?

**DeAnna:** So this really spans a range, it depends a lot on the job and a lot on the agency. But I would say the minimum proficiency level required would be an ILR level 2 which is known as limited working proficiency.

So this is sort of a baseline proficiency level that indicates that a speaker can function in a particular language, [10:00] take care of transactions and tasks that they may need to do on a daily basis, but it does not indicate full control over different parts of the language, for example, grammar or vocabulary may still be rough or not well developed. And speakers at this level typically only operate in very concrete daily sort of transactional [10:30] functions.

So for that reason, many agencies and many positions do require higher level of functioning, which would be the ILR level 3, which we refer to as general professional proficiency. Some agencies and some positions even require ILR levels 4 and 5 depending on, you know, what the position is and what the person would [11:00] need to be doing with that language in that position.

**Mathilda:** Laura, how about in the State Department?

**Laura:** Requirements depend on the specific position that you hold at posts. So typical requirements are a 2 in speaking, a 2 in reading or a 3 in speaking, a 3 in reading, though some positions require little or no reading proficiency, depending on what work you're going to be doing. So the State Department requires [11:30] that foreign service generalists, which are foreign service officers, that they demonstrate proficiency in at least one language in their first five years of service to get off what we call language probation. Generalists, those foreign service officers hold positions such as consular officer, economic officer, political management, or public diplomacy officer. We also have specialists, [12:00] foreign service specialist positions, such as diplomatic security and office management specialists. And they often require a 2 in speaking, a 2 in reading.

**Mathilda:** Is there anything else about the ILR proficiency scale that you would like to share with our listeners?

**DeAnna:** So I think it's important to know that while the ILR scale is widely used across government agencies, each agency does have its own mission and interprets the ILR [12:30] scale through a lens that's specific to that mission. You really need to know what the requirements of the job position are in order to understand what the language requirements and the hiring requirements would be, in terms of the language proficiency.

**Mathilda:** Right. And is this something they say usually when they're looking for a specific level? Like you were saying, some are like minimum [13:00] level 2, others are minimum level 3.

**DeAnna:** Yes. So knowing something about the job requirements may give you more information about the language skills that would be required. For example, more of administrative positions are probably down on a level 2, whereas more professional positions may be level 3. If you're looking at in-country missions on a diplomatic [13:30] level or something like that, you may be looking more at a level 4, level 5 requirement.

But in some cases, some agencies do offer training. And so even if you don't come in with the proficiency score exactly where you need it for a particular position, sometimes they do offer courses to get you up to speed, so to speak.

**Mathilda:** Laura, is there [14:00] anything else about the ILR scale and what it means for heritage learners that you would like to share with our listeners?

**Laura:** It's really important that heritage language speakers demonstrate their ability to use the language at a professional level. So often heritage language speakers have limited schooling in their heritage language. Some need to develop more fully their use of professional registers and vocabulary. They might have [14:30] excellent fluency when it comes to aspects of daily life and conversation but be less skilled in using the professional register or speaking about their field of expertise.

In our interviews with heritage learners who've been successful in FSI training and performed well on our tests, we've learned that they often come to training feeling like their skills are [15:00] sufficient already, that they know the language, they're able to do everything they've needed to do in the language thus far like communicate with their family and they're a little resistant to training. But often after a progress evaluation, they'll come to a sort of aha moment after which they say to themselves, "okay, maybe I should expand my knowledge of the language and polish my skills" and become more open to [15:30] feedback and able to advance their skills beyond their comfort zone to the necessary professional level, to talk about international events and policies. We always want to build upon their strengths and foundation and encourage them to widen their repertoire.

**Mathilda:** That's really true. I can really relate to being a heritage learner of English and in my schooling, you know, being kind of resistant to being taught [16:00] English, until I realized there was so much for me to learn, and that was in high school.

**Laura:** The world is your oyster. There are so many different ways of wording things and to become more precise and to realize, oh, I only know a certain part of the language. There are many other registers and people to talk to and things to talk about and you know, we talk differently in a meeting than we do on the phone than we do [16:30] when we're doing a formal presentation. So learning to use all those different contexts in your language use is really wonderful.

[Transition music]

**Mathilda:** Well, that's all for today's episode of the Language Pathways Podcast! Thank you for joining us, and a big thank you for our guests, DeAnna Coon and Dr. Laura Fyfe for sharing their expertise on the ILR proficiency scale. Let's sum things up.

[17:00] First, we learned that the ILR scale that runs from 0 to 5 is an important tool used by the federal government for determining someone's proficiency in speaking, reading, listening, and writing in a language. We also learned that some jobs require a minimum level 2 to be considered for a position, and others may have a minimum of 3 or even 4 depending on the context in which the language would be used. Finally, we learned that when applying for a federal job, [17:30] it's important for you to look at the ILR proficiency level requirements of the position you want and then work on building the language skills needed to meet those requirements, which may include building skills for more formal and professional settings.

In the next episode, we'll continue to build connections between language learning and federal careers by talking about language learning, volunteer, and work opportunities to prepare for a government career.

To continue on your journey through federal [18:00] career pathways for heritage language learners, check out the other episodes in this series. You can also find the resources we discussed and additional links in the episode description and on our website. Thank you for joining us and see you next time!

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[Outro music]