

What is Proficiency ? Part 1: The Intermediate and Advanced Learner

The history of teaching languages is littered with the names of a variety of approaches to language learning – grammar-based approach, audio-lingual, stimulus-response, Silent way, translation method and so on. Of recent years much attention had been given to **a communicative approach** on the grounds that language is primarily used for communication and success in language learning is **task oriented**. In other words, it is related more to **how well a learner functions in performing a linguistic task** such as making a request or apologizing, than to whether he knows and can use a particular grammar structure of the language appropriately. Professor Seiichi Makino, Director of the Japanese Language program at Princeton University, New Jersey and author of a number of books on Japanese including dictionaries on Basic and Intermediate Grammar published by the Japan Times, goes further to describe the relationship between **a proficiency approach** and the communicative approach. Both are task- oriented but **in the proficiency approach the emphasis is on thinking vertically about levels as well as horizontally about tasks**.

The American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages (ACTFL) is known world-wide for its testing of proficiency at 4 levels – Novice, Intermediate, Advanced and Superior. All levels apart from Superior are sub-divided into Low, Mid and High. These levels can be applied to all language skills but in OMF they are used to assess speaking proficiency in oral interviews conducted by Japanese teachers trained by ACTFL workshops in Tokyo. The majority of missionaries who have done fulltime language study and are assessed both at the end of their first and second terms in Japan fall within the range of Intermediate to Advanced levels. **In the light of this, it is important to consider what the levels mean and what one can do to get from one level to a higher one.**

So what do the levels mean? Below are lists of the general characteristics of the Intermediate and Advanced speaking levels simplified from guidelines put out by ACTFL in 1999. You may like to measure your own Japanese language ability against these descriptions.

Intermediate : Able to

- Participate in simple, direct conversations on generally predictable topics related to daily activities and personal environment
- Create with the language and communicate personal meaning to sympathetic listeners by making sentences and strings of sentences
- Get and give information by asking and answering questions
- Keep going and end a number of basic, uncomplicated communicative exchanges most of which will have been initiated by someone else.
- Satisfy simple and personal needs and social demands to survive in the target language and culture.

Advanced: Able to

- Participate actively in conversations in most informal and some formal settings on topics of personal and public interest
- Fully narrate and describe events in the past, present or future
- Deal effectively with unexpected complications through a variety of communicative strategies
- Keep communication going by using with accuracy and confidence, connected discourse (as opposed to isolated sentences) of paragraph length and content
- Satisfy the demands of work situations

Part 2: Reaching for a higher level of oral proficiency

In Part 1 we looked at what proficiency is in terms of levels from Novice to Superior and what the language speaker is required to do in terms of tasks at each level of ability. Having defined ‘proficiency’ in these ways we now come to the all- important question **‘What do I need to do to get from my present level to a higher one particularly when I am intermediate or above?’** It is always so encouraging to feel one’s progress at the lower levels of proficiency. What you couldn’t express yesterday you have learnt to express today. But once past the stage of learning basic sentence patterns **it is all too easy to get discouraged with lack of progress.** There are several reasons for this:

- It is harder to assess progress at this level. Intermediate plus levels tend to be evaluated in terms of breadth of vocabulary, fluency, communicative ability,, appropriate social use of language and so on – less easily quantifiable factors than, for e.g., use of the past tense.
- It is also true to say that the more language you know the more potential there is for misuse.
- By the time many missionaries have reached an intermediate level of proficiency they likely to be on the point of leaving full time language study. It is often very difficult to balance the desire to keep up one’s language study with the demands of ministry.
- By the intermediate stage one can generally get by in life in Japan with the language one has. It is all too easy to be satisfied with “getting by.” This, in turn, can lead to what are known in language teaching as “terminal intermediate learners”, that is, speakers whose foreign language ability has ceased to develop and whose errors and limited vocabulary has become in some way “fossilized” in their usage of it.

So what kind of practice is needed for the learner to break out of the bounds of intermediate level Japanese?

Professor Makino of Princeton University emphasizes that **a key characteristic of intermediate speakers is speaking in sentences while the advanced learner is able to produce discourse, or sustain speaking in connected sentences on a single topic.** In other words they are able to produce what in written speech would be called paragraphs. They have mastered the words and grammar necessary to connect their sentences appropriately (in Japanese ‘danwa bunpo’).

Professor Makino pointed out that if the ability to do what he calls **‘hitori banashi’** is a characteristic of advanced level speech, then the intermediate learner must practice doing just that ie ‘hitori banashi’, if he is to progress to the higher level. In fact, giving a talk at a ladies’ meeting or preaching the Sunday sermon are advanced examples of ‘hitori banashi’ but whether one has to speak in formal situations like this or not, most of us will be called upon even in informal conversation to do ‘hitori banashi’. If you are asked why you came to Japan, for example, you will need to explain using some consecutive and connected sentences. In leading Bible studies you may be drawing people out by asking questions but at some point you are bound to find a need to summarize the teaching or attempt to explain what some Christian concept such as ‘grace’ or ‘sin’ means.

If you are an intermediate learner seeking to improve find yourself a teacher willing to set you topics to speak on for a couple of minutes or more. Or choose your own topics – according to your interests and needs, for e.g., your family, an item from yesterday’s news, or Christian topics that so often crop up in conversation with Japanese such as the difference between Protestants and Catholics. Start with simple topics and build up to more demanding ones. You can prepare beforehand or simply impromptu if confident enough. **Best is if you have a language helper who can record you as you speak and then playback the recording correcting major mistakes, clarifying anything unclear or introducing better ways of expressing something.** This is a method which has been effective in helping people to get fluency in praying too. Remember that fluency as an end in itself is no good without a reasonably high degree of accuracy though we are not aiming for perfection. What you say must communicate.

Below is a list copied from OMF’s sermon course of possible topics for practicing ‘hitoribanashi’.

ショートスピーチ・題目リスト

キリスト教

- (※) 聖書を初めて読む人へのアドバイス
- (※) カトリックとプロテスタントの違い
- (※) 日本ではなぜクリスチャンが増えにくいのか
- (※) (資) 宗教事情
- (※) 聖書の中のたとえ話／聖書の中の奇跡
(どちらか一方／両方も可)
- (※) 聖書の中の好きな人物／聖書の中の好きな御言葉
(どちらか一方／両方も可)
- 聖書の概略 (年代／記者／内容～)
- 日本での働きのビジョン
- 宣教師の仕事
- △△とは？ (福音／洗礼／神の国～)
- 私の召命
- 創世記と進化論
- (※) あなたの宣教団体はどんな団体ですか？ (歴史的な内容を含む)

日本事情

- (※) 私が見た日本人
- (※) (資) 高齢化社会
- (※) (資) コミュニケーション・スタイル (⇒実施要項参照)
- (資) ある一家の家計
- (資) 余暇
- (資) 学歴偏重社会

その他

- (※) 日本語の難しさ
- (※) 結婚について (制度・習慣／自分の結婚観～)
- 日本にあって自国にない習慣
- 日本の食文化・自国の食文化
- 日本に来てから最も印象的だったこと
- 日本人の友人