

# How Much in How Long ?

## — Estimating the Length of Time It Takes to Learn a Foreign Language

by Julian BAMFORD

In 1973, The Foreign Service Institute of the U. S. Department of State released one of the few published estimates of how long it takes to learn a foreign language. These figures, as they relate to Japanese and English speakers learning each others' language, are reexamined and related to results from other learning programs. It is shown that, by taking into account the variables of different programs, the 1973 figures may form a useful baseline with which to judge the effectiveness of a language program.

A friend told me recently that he has begun to teach in a full-time English language program here in Japan where, after two years, students exit with TOEIC scores averaging 400 (TOEFL 435)<sup>(1)</sup> I gaped in amazement, not just at the low level of achievement, but at the apparent obliviousness to it by the professional staff of the school in question. But what about myself ? I recently began to study Japanese again on my own for an hour a day. I, too, consider myself a professional language teacher, but I had no idea how much improvement I could expect in how much time.

Very little has been written about how long it takes to learn another language. One exception is the estimate made in 1973 by the Foreign Service Institute of the U. S. Department of State. These are precise figures of how long it took students to learn foreign languages in their own classes at that time, and Karl Diller has called them "perhaps the most realistic . . . estimates of time requirements for foreign language achievements."<sup>(2)</sup> There are, of course, many variables in language learning, such as whether one studies in a foreign or second language environment; the method of instruction, etc. Do these make it entirely impossible to predict how much can be learned in how long ? The following paper is an attempt to see if, using the above and other sources, anything useful can be said.

We can start with the Foreign Service Institute (FSI) estimates.<sup>(3)</sup> The first thing to understand is that not all languages are considered of equal difficulty. For native English speakers, the FSI divides foreign languages into four groups, from easiest to most difficult. They estimate, for example, that it takes up to four times longer to learn Japanese (a 'most difficult' language) than French (an 'easiest' language) (see Fig. 2 below). This is certainly not in line with conventional wisdom, illustrated in a recent letter to the editor of *The Japan Times* which stated, "It is no more difficult to master spoken Japanese than most other languages."<sup>(4)</sup>

The next important consideration is the level of learning to be achieved. The FSI uses a set of explicit descriptions of oral / aural language ability. This is now known as the ILR scale, and is summarized below:<sup>(6)</sup>

- Level 0+      Almost no spontaneity of expression. Long pauses in production. Can ask questions and make statements with reasonable accuracy only when involving short memorized utterances. Word endings often omitted or confused. Even with repetition, comprehension errors can severely inhibit communication even with persons used to dealing with such learners.
- Level 1      *Minimum Survival* Basic functions and vocabulary in place. All spontaneous utterances fractured; few modifiers used so little precision of information conveyed. Can understand formulae or slow / rephrased speech on obvious topics.
- Level 2      *Survival* Can handle with confidence but not facility most social needs; vocabulary sufficient to respond simply with circumlocution. Accuracy of elementary constructions evident but inconsistent. Can sustain general conversation, but extended discourse is largely a series of short discrete utterances. Gets gist of most non-technical conversation.
- Level 2+      Often fluent speech but can break down under pressure. Strong in either vocabulary or grammar, but not both. Weakness in one of these or pronunciation leads to occasional miscommunication.
- Level 3      *Minimum Professional Proficiency* Quite complete comprehension for normal speech. Rarely has to grope for words. Good grammar control.
- Level 4      *Full Professional Proficiency* Rarely taken as native speaker, but can understand and participate in any conversation within range of own experience, with high degree of fluency and precision of vocabulary. Can handle informal interpreting from one language to another.
- Level 5      *Native Speaker Proficiency (Bilingual)*

Rough guidelines have been published which relate scores in the TOEIC and TOEFL examinations to these levels, and these are summarized in Figure 1.<sup>(6)</sup> Level 2+ is the equivalent of TOEFL 550 (TOEIC 730), the score required by many US universities for foreign student admission.

Figure 2 is a graph based on the FSI 1973 figures. Estimate your (or your students') present level in the target language, then decide what level of proficiency you aim to attain. The distance between the two points on the vertical axis corresponds to the number of hours of study needed to reach the goal.

Figure 3 tells you how many years it will take to achieve your goal, depending on the number of hours of study per week. These estimates should include homework: the average (adult) student in the average program would probably spend  $\frac{2}{3}$  of study time with a teacher, and  $\frac{1}{3}$  of the time doing homework and self-study.

What of the variables? The first, language difficulty, is reflected in Figure 2. Others are listed below with discussion of what effect they might have on the length of time needed to reach a level of proficiency.<sup>(7)</sup>

*Foreign Language (FL) / Second Language (SL) Environment:* Intensive FSI classes are, it is guessed, conducted mainly in the US, in other words, a foreign language environment.<sup>(8)</sup> If you study in a country or environment where the target language is used, so that it surrounds you and you use it most of the time outside class, one would expect a substantial cut in the number of study hours required to reach proficiency. Obviously, for Japanese students who study English in Los Angeles or London only to spend their free time with Japanese friends speaking Japanese, and for foreign students who do the equivalent in Japan, this second language environment advantage would be largely diluted. Conversely, FL programs that attempt to simulate SL environments, with out-of-class 'speak target language only' rules, free-time video entertainment, etc., can expect a portion of the SL advantage.

*Class Size:* FSI classes probably have 8 or more students. In an FL intensive program, working with a tutor or in a class of 2-3 students creates an effect similar or better than that of working in a second language environment. Any deficiency in methodology or motivation is compensated for by the intensity of personal contact. One would expect spectacular savings in study time. In general, the larger the class, the more important are enlightened methodology and strong student motivation (see below).

*Motivation:* FSI students are undoubtedly motivated. In larger classes, students must be self-motivated for there is so much opportunity for unmotivated students to 'hide'. Only in classes of perhaps 6 or fewer is it sufficient for students to agree to bring their bodies to school: once there, they will have to participate, perform... and learn. Expect large increases in the study hours necessary for large classes of weakly motivated students.

*Methodology:* FSI methodology probably reflected the norm for 1973: modified audio-

lingual, which one would expect to have produced average results in strongly motivated students. Method is the most controversial variable of all. In the absence of hard evidence from research in comparative methodology, I offer the following lists which are as much a product of my own intuition and prejudice as anything else:

One would expect the following elements to have a negative effect on a program aimed at developing communicative competence:

- \* continuing use of first language in class
- \* doing drills without understanding what you are saying
- \* doing exercises / drills that have no relation to your self or interests
- \* hearing a lot of target language you do not understand
- \* boring class content

The following elements would probably have a positive effect on a program:

- \* intensive practice of structure, functions and vocabulary in contexts relevant and personal, with the mind engaged not only with the form, but with the meaning of the language.
- \* hearing target language you understand at least the gist of
- \* plenty of recycling / review (especially in an FL environment)
- \* interesting class content

Having mapped out the territory, let's now look at two actual language programs and their results, and see if they can be explained within these boundaries.

*Berlitz*: In one intensive program recently reported in the press<sup>(9)</sup>, students appear to put in 50 hours a week for class and homework, reaching ILR level 3 after a year. Classes are 2—3 students in a second language environment. This is a 40 % improvement over FSI figures, which is about what one would expect from the class size and SL environment. One participant, however, characterizes the program as “a cross between banging your head against a wall and having all your teeth pulled out.” There is a price to pay, it seems, for such intensity and method of study.

*ASB*: I used to work in an intensive language program in Tokyo. Students spent 40 hours a week studying in and out of class (the same as an FSI program). A partial SL environment was created during breaks and for an hour or two after class until students went home. Classes averaged 6 members, so that student motivation problems were lessened by the closeness of contact. The curriculum included most elements of ‘positive’ methodology except for 20 % of the program which, with its audio-lingual pattern practice drills, fell squarely in the ‘negative’ camp.

Students entering at Level 0+ reached TOEFL 550 (TOEIC 730), or Level 2+, in 18 months. Those entering at Level 1 took only 11 months. These times are longer than FSI figures by 15–30%. This may seem surprising considering the number of ‘time-reducing’ elements in the program. But students said they ‘kind of enjoyed’ the course. With students lacking the strong instrumental motivation commonly found in FSI and Berlitz intensive programs, the curriculum was deliberately low-pressure.

By taking into account the variables, the results from the above two differing programs appear to have a relationship to the FSI ‘baseline’ figures. This would suggest that the FSI figures are of value, and should be more widely known so that administrators and even students can better judge the effectiveness of their own programs. Where results fall seriously short of the FSI estimates, attention can be paid to the variables to see if any positive changes are possible.<sup>(10)</sup>

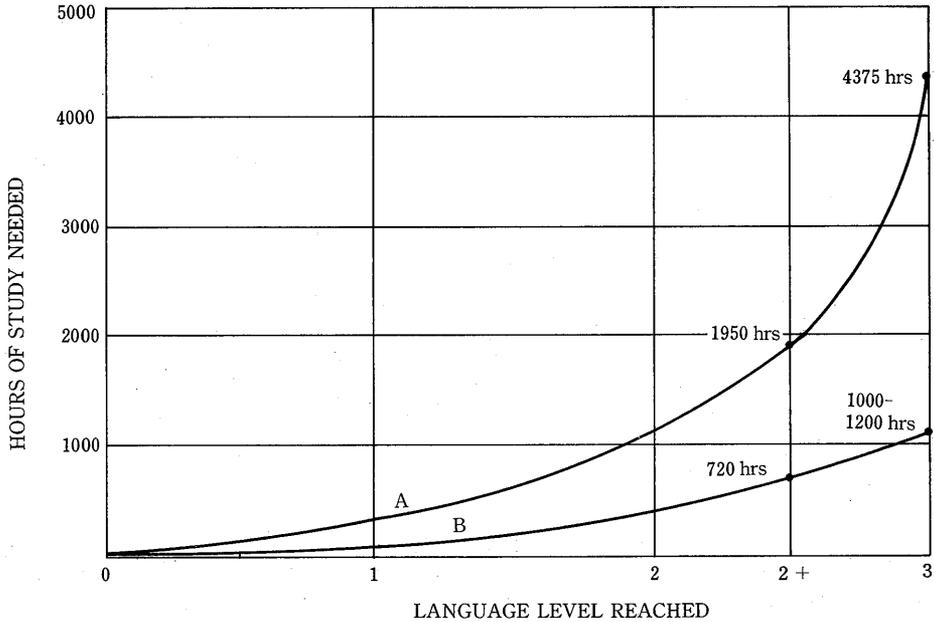
For myself, with my hour-a-day work at Japanese, starting at Level 1+, I can expect to reach my Level 3 goal in about 8 years if I give myself a hefty 50% reduction in time for the SL environment. My destination is invisible, as is any progress, but at least I’m moving ahead with my eyes open.

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level/scores

ILR	TOEIC	TOEFL
4 / 4 +	A 860	595
3 / 3 +	B 730	550
2 / 2 +	C 470	460
1 / 1 +	D 220	373
0 / 0 +	E	

FIGURE 1: A comparison of ILR Proficiency Levels to scores and levels in the TOEIC and TOEFL examinations.



(A= 'hardest' languages ; B= 'easiest' languages)  
 FIGURE 2 : FSI (1973) estimates of how long it takes to learn a foreign language.

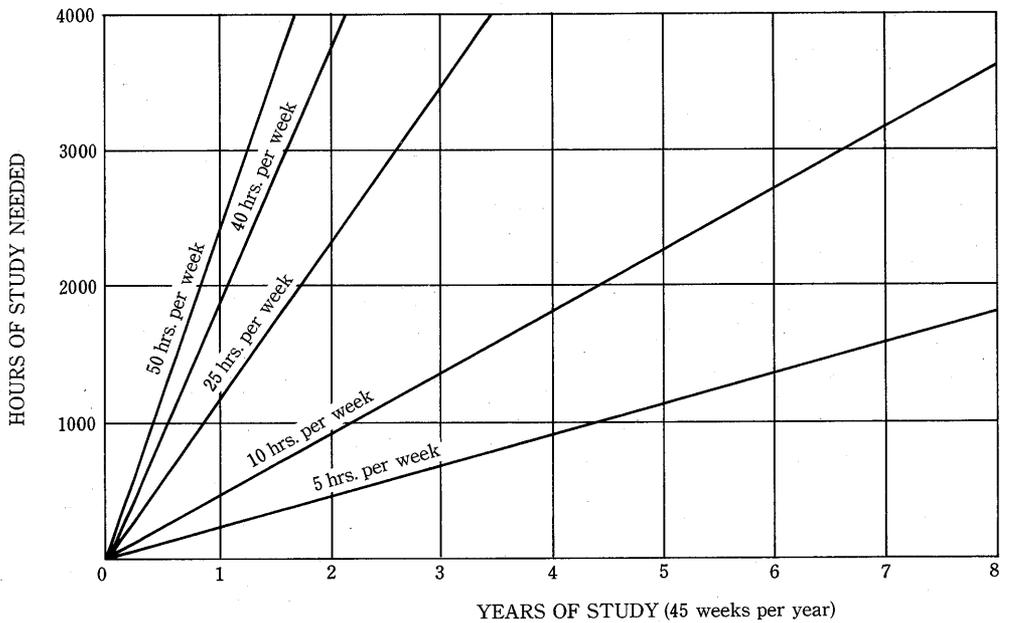


FIGURE 3 : How long it will take to reach a goal according to study time per week.

## notes

1. The TOEIC / TOEFL equivalents in this paper were calculated using the formula:  $\text{TOEIC score} \times 0.348 + 296 = \text{TOEFL score}$ . While the TOEIC and TOEFL examinations claim to test different skills, and thus scores cannot be correlated, this formula has been made available by the Educational Testing Service as a general guide for comparing results from the two examinations.  
Source: TOEIC Data and Analysis: 1st – 13th Administration, Accumulated.” Princeton: Educational Testing Service (undated Japanese language pamphlet)
2. Diller, Karl Conrad. *The Language Teaching Controversy*. Rowley, Massachusetts: Newbury House, 1978 (p. 134)
3. These are cited in Diller, pp. 100; 134. He gives the original source as a mimeographed chart: “Expected Levels of Absolute Speaking Proficiency in Languages Taught at the Foreign Service Institute.” Foreign Service Institute, 1973.
4. “Japanese difficulty a myth ?” Letter to the Editor *The Japan Times* August 15th, 1987.
5. The summaries in this paper are based on a mimeograph (source unknown) entitled “ILR Speaking Definitions,” but the names of the levels are my own. The names used in this paper I hope more clearly summarize each level to the layman. In Diller’s discussion of the ILR scale (see Note 2 above), his naming of the levels appears inconsistent. The original ILR names, and Diller’s references are collected below:
  1. Elementary Proficiency (ILR)
  2. Limited Working Proficiency (ILR); Minimum Working Proficiency (Diller, p. 100)
  3. Professional Proficiency (ILR); Minimum Professional Proficiency (Diller, p. 134); Working Professional Proficiency (Diller, p. 100)
  4. Representational Proficiency (ILR); Full Professional Proficiency (Diller, p. 134)
  5. Native or Bilingual Proficiency (ILR); Native Speaker Proficiency (Diller, p. 134)(Note: ILR is the abbreviation for Interagency Language Roundtable)
6. For source, see Note 1 above.
7. One apparent variable omitted from this discussion is aptitude. The FSI expected students with superior aptitude to reach a given level in half the time taken by those with minimum aptitude (Diller, p. 125). But as aptitude tests are rarely given in language programs in Japan at present, and thus classes are not divided by aptitude, there seems no purpose in considering it here. One presumes the FSI figures are for students of average aptitude.
8. This is the first in a series of educated guesses about the FSI intensive language programs in 1973, the year when the figures were published.
9. “Execs find learning Japanese a pain.” (Reuter-Kyodo) *The Japan Times* July 29, 1987.
10. It is interesting to note that in Japanese junior high / high schools, students exit with an ILR level of 0+, with better students closer to Level 1. They have spent an average of 1350 hours to achieve what took 250 hours in FSI intensive classes. These poor results become understandable when one realizes that English classes in the Japanese school system are not geared to teaching communicative competence. The methodology, successful in preparing students for entrance exams, contains most of the ‘negative’ elements with regard to learning to communicate, and student motivation is often low.