

## What is Fluency? - Language Proficiency

There does not seem to be a universally agreed-upon definition of fluency in the general public. I have heard it described as anything from being able to order food to the language ability of a native speaker. The following table is my version of the closest thing there is to an official definition: what linguists and teachers tend to agree are the basic levels of language aptitude.

### **Novice**

### **(Beginning)**

A novice has extremely limited vocabulary and grammar, understands very little of the language when spoken normally, has difficulty making self understood by native speakers, and thus has serious problems in an immersion situation. A novice may be able to order food in a restaurant, buy a train ticket, and find lodging for the night, but only with great difficulty.

### **Survivor**

### **(Intermediate)**

A survivor converses using basic vocabulary (time, date, weather, family, clothes); uses the present, past, and future tenses more or less correctly; and is aware of difficult grammar topics (e.g., subjunctive, relative pronouns), but either uses them incorrectly or awkwardly rearranges sentences in order to avoid them. Still needs to tote a dictionary and/or phrase book around, but can survive in an immersion situation: order food, give and receive directions, take a taxi, etc.

### **Conversationalist**

### **(Advanced)**

A conversationalist has the ability to converse about fairly abstract ideas, state opinions, read newspapers, understand the language when spoken normally (on TV, radio, film, etc.) with slight-to-moderate difficulty. Still has some trouble with specialized vocabulary and complicated grammar, but can reorganize sentences in order to communicate and figure out the majority of new vocabulary within the context.

### **Debater**

### **(Fluent)**

A fluent speaker can participate in extended conversations, understand the language when spoken normally (on TV, radio, film, etc.), figure out meaning of words within context, debate, and use/understand complicated grammatical structures with little or no difficulty. Has good accent and understands dialects with slight-to-moderate difficulty.

### **Native speaker**

### **(Mother tongue)**

Someone who has spoken the language from at least the age of 5 (this age limit is subject to some debate: I've heard theories that a native speaker can have started learning the language as late as any time up to puberty). In theory, understands essentially everything in the language: all vocabulary, complicated grammatical structures, cultural references, and dialects. Has a native (i.e., invisible, "normal" in his/her region) accent.

## Am I Fluent? - Language Proficiency

In order to figure out whether you are fluent in a language, you need to analyze your own language abilities. According to the "official" definition, fluency refers to an ability to converse fluidly and easily. Do you feel comfortable speaking the language? Can you communicate easily with native speakers? Can you read newspapers, listen to the radio, and watch tv? Are you able to understand the gist of the language as it is spoken and written, even if you don't know every single word? Can you understand native speakers from different regions? The more fluent you are, the more of these questions you can answer "yes" to.

**Context** - A fluent speaker may have some gaps in vocabulary, but is capable of figuring out these terms in context. Likewise s/he can reword sentences in order to describe an object, explain an idea, or get a point across, even if s/he doesn't know the actual terms.

**Thinking in the language** - Pretty much everyone agrees that this is an important sign of fluency. Thinking in the language means that you understand the words without actually translating them into your native language. For example, non-fluent speakers would hear or read the sentence "J'habite à Paris" and would think to themselves (slowly if they are beginners, more quickly if they are more advanced) something like:

J' is from je - I...  
habite is from habiter - to live...  
à can mean in, to, or at...  
Paris...  
I - live - in - Paris.

What's it like to think in a language? How long did it take you? <u>Join the discussion!</u>
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A fluent speaker wouldn't need to go through all that; s/he would intuitively understand "J'habite à Paris" as easily as "I live in Paris." The reverse is also true: when speaking or writing, a fluent speaker doesn't need to construct the sentence in his/her native language and then translate it into the target language - a fluent speaker thinks of what s/he wants to say in the language s/he wants to say it.

**Dreams** - Many people say that dreaming in the language is an essential indicator of fluency. I personally don't subscribe to this belief, because

- I've only dreamed in French once (13 years after I began to study it) and I've never dreamed in Spanish.
- I know a number of people who have dreamed in a language after only a year or two of study.
- I once had an entire dream in Polish, which I studied for a total of about 12 non-intensive, non-immersion hours.

However, I certainly agree that dreaming in the language of study is a good sign - it shows that the language is being incorporated into your subconscious.