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BYU Humanities Center



Failing Forward: Strategies for Learning a New Language

Education Week 2025

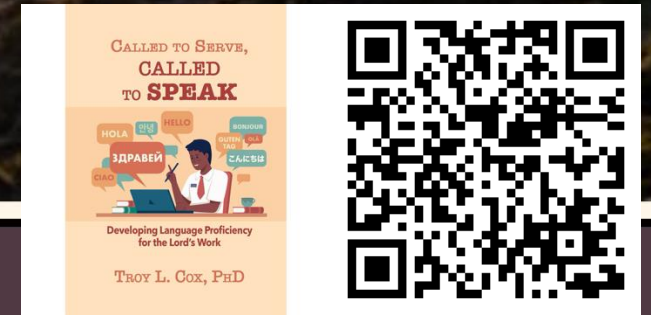
Troy L. Cox troyc@byu.edu , PhD

Center for Language Studies, BYU

Slides



Book





Storytime

Think-Pair-Share

What's a failure that taught you something valuable that you have never forgotten?

- Think: Jot down a brief reflection (30 seconds)
- Pair: Get in partners or small groups, introduce yourselves and discuss (90 seconds)
- Share: Be prepared to be called on and to report what your partner told you

1. Failure is Essential for Language Learning!



- Progress happens when we push beyond our comfort zone.
- Mistakes are not setbacks—they are stepping stones.
- You learn more from your mistakes than your successes.

Who is Troy L. Cox?

Professor, Second Language Studies

Associate Director Research and Assessment at Center for Language Studies
(2013-present)

Technology and Assessment Coordinator at the English Language Center
(1996-2013)



Example 1

My name **is** Troy Cox. I **am** a professor at Brigham Young University. I **have worked** here since 1996. I **am** in the Linguistics Department **and am** part of the Center for Language Studies. I **am married** to Heidi, **and** we **have** three children. They **are** Cameron, Hannah **and** Millie. We **have** two dogs: a mother **and** her son. Her name **is** JoJo, **and** his name **is** Remy. **When** I **don't work**, I like to **ride** my bike, **take** photos, **cook**, and **practice** yoga.

Total word count :	86
Number of different words :	60
Complexity factor (Lexical Density) :	70%
Sentence count :	9
Average sentence length (words) :	9.6

Example 2

My name is Troy Cox, and I've been working full-time at Brigham Young University since 1996. While I am currently in the Center for Language Studies (CLS), the first 17 years of my work at the Y had me at the English Language Center where I worked concurrent with my pursuit of a PhD. After receiving my doctorate, I applied for a faculty position at the CLS as the research and assessment coordinator, was hired, and began working there in 2013. But while my assignment is to the CLS, my home department is Linguistics. As a scholar, I do research in second language learning, teaching and assessment. I've been married to the wonderful Heidi Cox for a few months longer than I've been at BYU, and we are the parents of three children: Cameron, Hannah and Millie. We've finally hit empty-nester status and are the owners of a Boston Terrier named JoJo who the kids call "the little angel" and claim is the new favorite child. We tried our hand at breeding and failed and kept her son that we named Remy.

The byline from my social media account sums my life up fairly well: Disciple; Husband & Father; Amateur Cyclist, Yogi, Cook & Photographer; Professor (Applied Linguistics/Language Testing).

I identify first and foremost as a man of faith and one who loves his family, but when I am not engaged in activities with my church or work, you'll find me road cycling, practicing yoga (power for the most part), cooking or working on my photography skills.

Total word count :	255
Number of different words :	160
Complexity factor (Lexical Density) :	63%
Sentence count :	10
Average sentence length (words) :	25.5

Think-Pair-Share: What is different between the two introductions?

Example 1

- My name is Troy Cox.
- I am a professor at Brigham Young University. I have worked here since 1996.
- I am in the Linguistics Department and am part of the Center for Language Studies.
- I am married to Heidi, and we have three children. They are Cameron, Hannah and Millie.
- I have two dogs: a mother and her son. Her name is JoJo and his name is Remy.
- When I don't work, I like to ride my bike, take photos, cook, and practice and teach yoga.

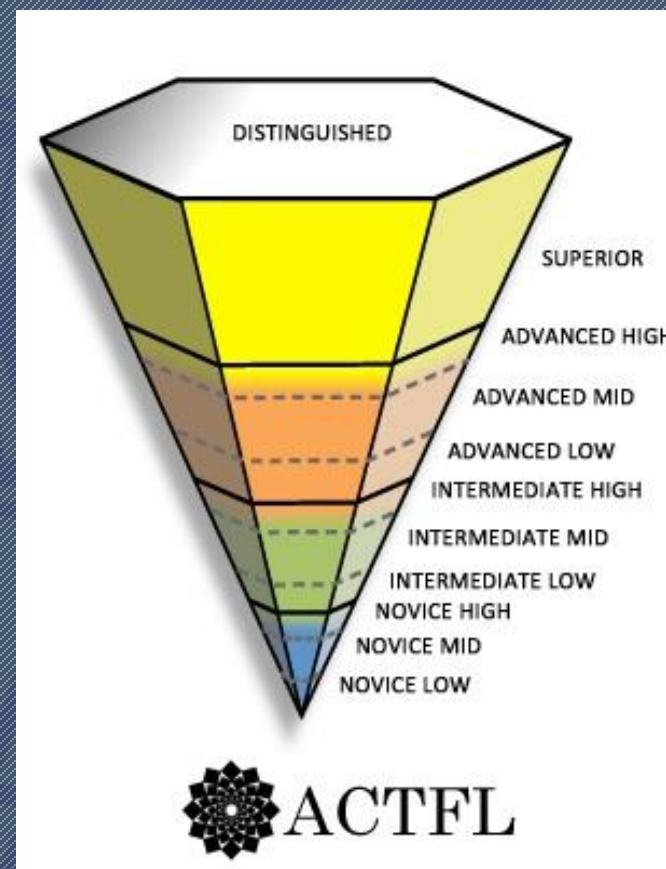
Example 2

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The ACTFL Proficiency Guidelines 2012

- Not what you KNOW about the language, but what you can DO SPONTANEOUSLY in real world situations.
- Five major levels (each subsumes all lower levels) that describe a confluence of:

- **F**unction
- **A**ccuracy
- **C**ontent/context
- **T**ext Type



*Keep your
FACTs straight
and you can
determine the
major level!*

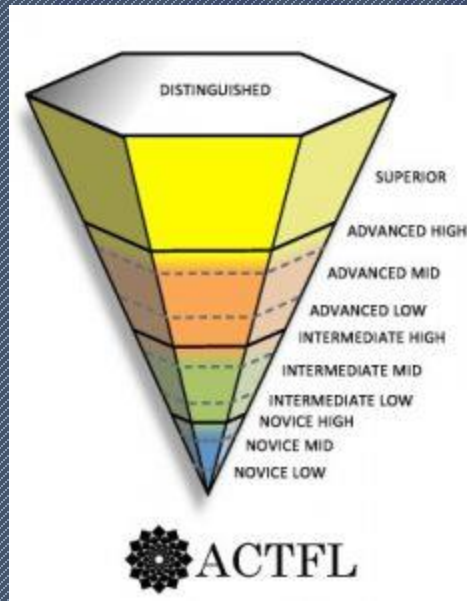
Criteria

Level	Novice (ILR-0)	Intermediate (ILR-1)	Advanced
F unctions	Communicate minimally Use formulaic utterances Produce words, lists and phrases	Create with Language Participate in Simple Conversations Ask and Answer Questions	Narrate and Describe in Major Time Frames (Past, Present and Future) Linguistically negotiate situations with complications
A ccuracy	Only understood by patient, sympathetic listeners accustomed to nonnative speakers	Understood by people accustomed to speaking to nonnative speakers	Can be understood without confusion by monolinguals not accustomed to speaking to nonnative speakers
C ontent/ context	Self	Self Daily Life	Self Daily Life Non-autobiographical Topics Topics of General Interest
T ext Type	Words Lists	Sentences	Paragraphs

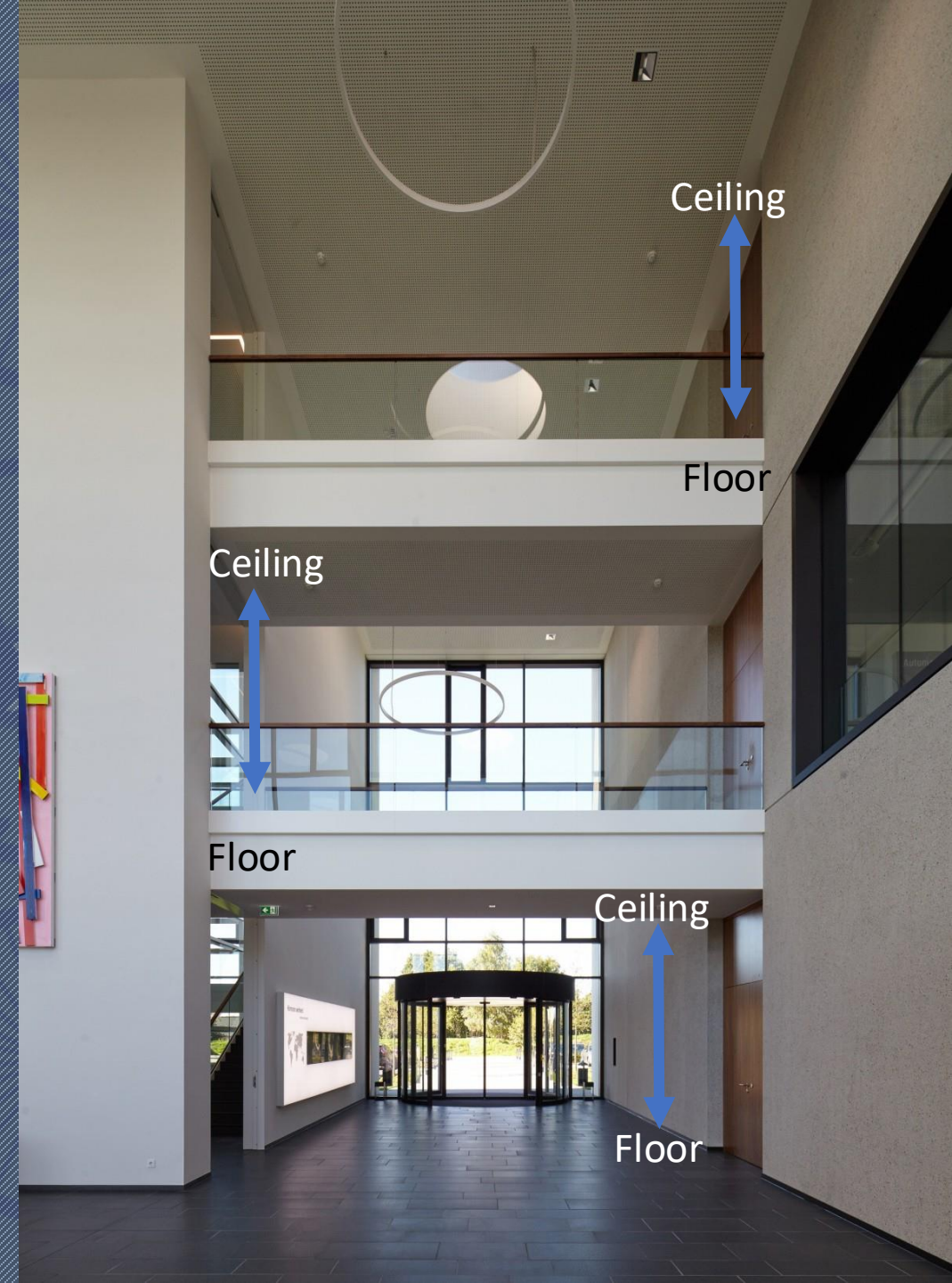
Proficiency Guidelines describe major levels of language development.

The floor level describes patterns of strength.

The ceiling level describes patterns of breakdown.



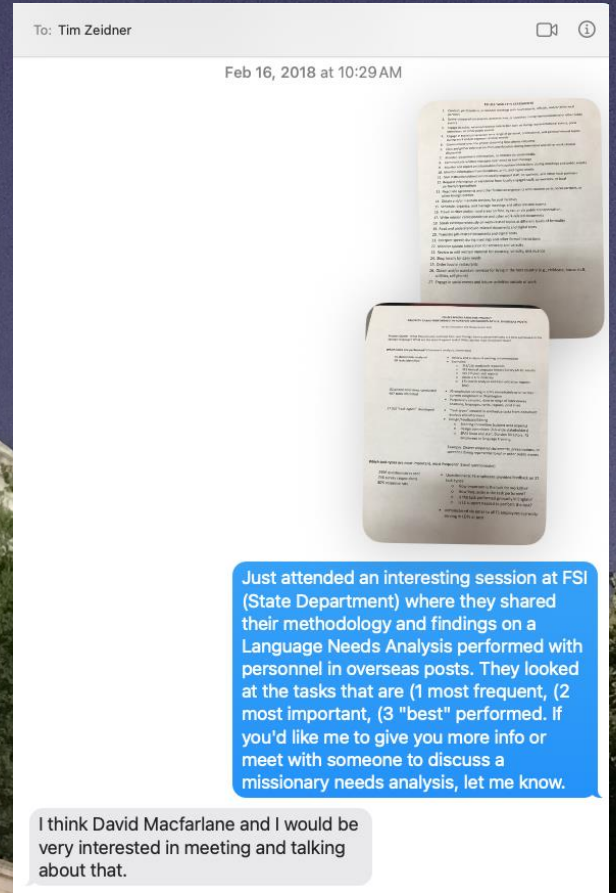
ThePhoto by PhotoAuthor is licensed under CCYSA.



Failure is Essential for Language Learning

Pause Point:

Write down one thing you want to remember from this section



Storytime—2017

A Few Key Insights

- Advanced (ACTFL) Language needed to perform the linguistic functions of missionaries.
 - The success of missionaries whose language ability is lower than Advanced is likely due to nonlinguistic compensatory factors
- Mission culture affects the language use and development of missionaries learning languages

Abstract: This large-scale study, based on surveys of over 1,400 missionaries and analyzed with rigorous statistical methods, provides a highly reliable picture of the critical language tasks missionaries must perform. Its robust design—including expert input, pilot testing, and strong reliability ($\alpha = .95$)—shows that advanced language proficiency is essential for effective missionary work across all skills.



TECHNICAL REPORT

LANGUAGE NEEDS ANALYSIS FOR THE
MISSIONARY TRAINING CENTER

Troy L. Cox, PhD, Associate Director for the Center for Language Studies, Brigham Young University

Judy (Rui) Ma, PhD Candidate, Educational Inquiry and Measurement, Brigham Young University

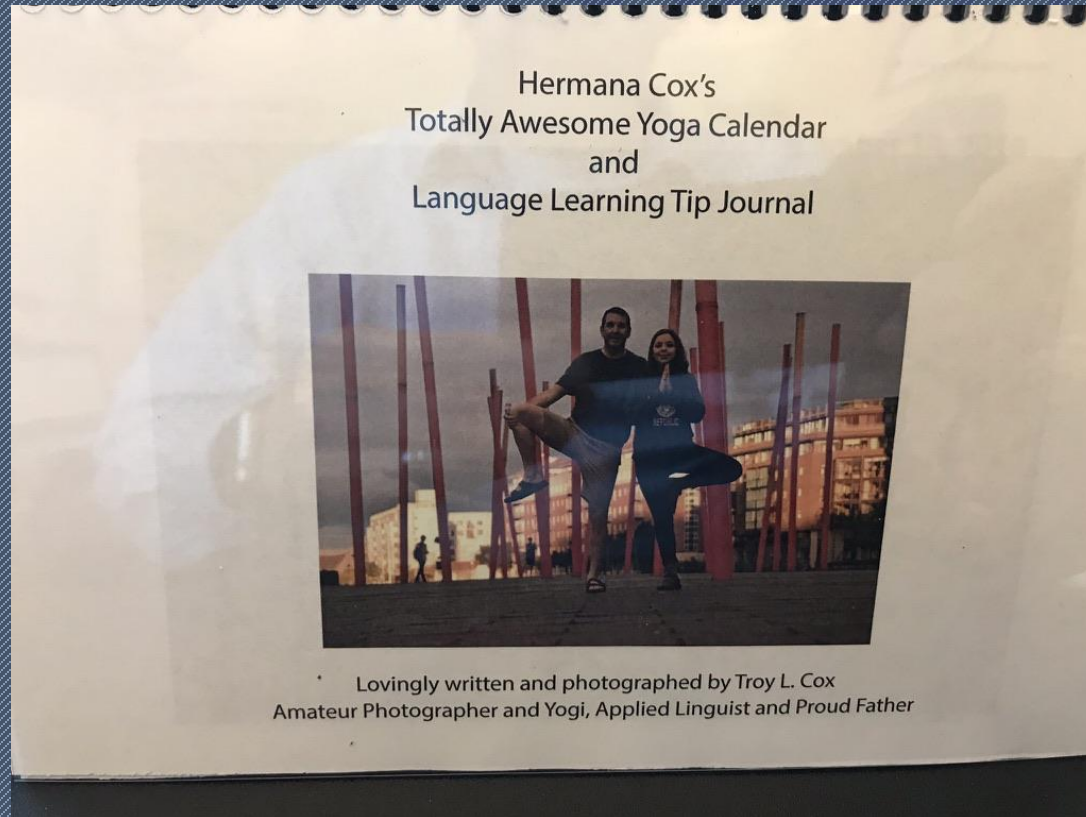
Jimmy Hernandez, PhD Candidate, Educational Inquiry and Measurement, Brigham Young University

Daniel Martin, MA Candidate, Linguistics, Brigham Young University

A Daughter's Mission Call



2. Deliberate Practice Helps Make Progress



- Consistent, feedback-driven effort accelerates growth.
- “Linguistic interval training” = balancing ease and challenge.

Language Learning Tip

The best way to increase in a skill is through deliberate practice. Use this calendar to make goals on what you want to work on and then record the time you spent. Look for the relationship between your time and effort and your improvement. Note things that you wanted to say in conversation but didn't have the vocabulary to express yourself. What grammatical forms do you still need to accomplish the language functions you desire. Every night, think through your day and make an entry. Refer to this as you contemplate what you should study.

I thought I'd make this calendar for you to help you stretch as a language learner. I did joke. Plus, I thought you'd miss my page selfies since you aren't on social media right now.

④ Try for 2018

A quick note: the tips are not in any particular order. Feel free to think through and look ahead. The most important skill to develop is to be deliberate in your practice. I also found a few errors in formatting - the pictures got off when I cut the pages in half, and at least one page is upside down. Oh well! I hope this helps.

Week Starting

Sunday, December 30, 2018

What are your goals this week to increase your testimony and your language proficiency?

How many minutes did you spend studying the gospel and language this week?

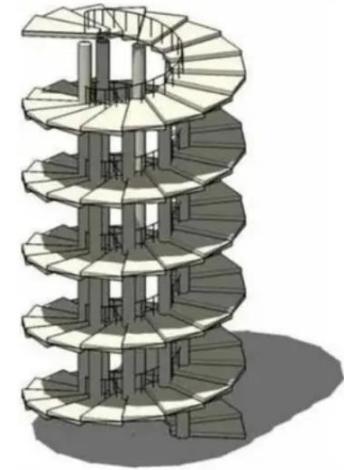
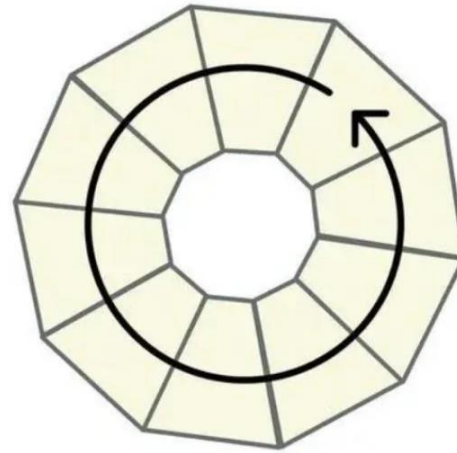
Sunday (12/30)
Monday (12/31)
Tuesday (1/1)
Wednesday (1/2)
Thursday (1/3)
Friday (1/4)
Saturday (1/5)

Weekly Totals
Gospel Study _____ Minutes

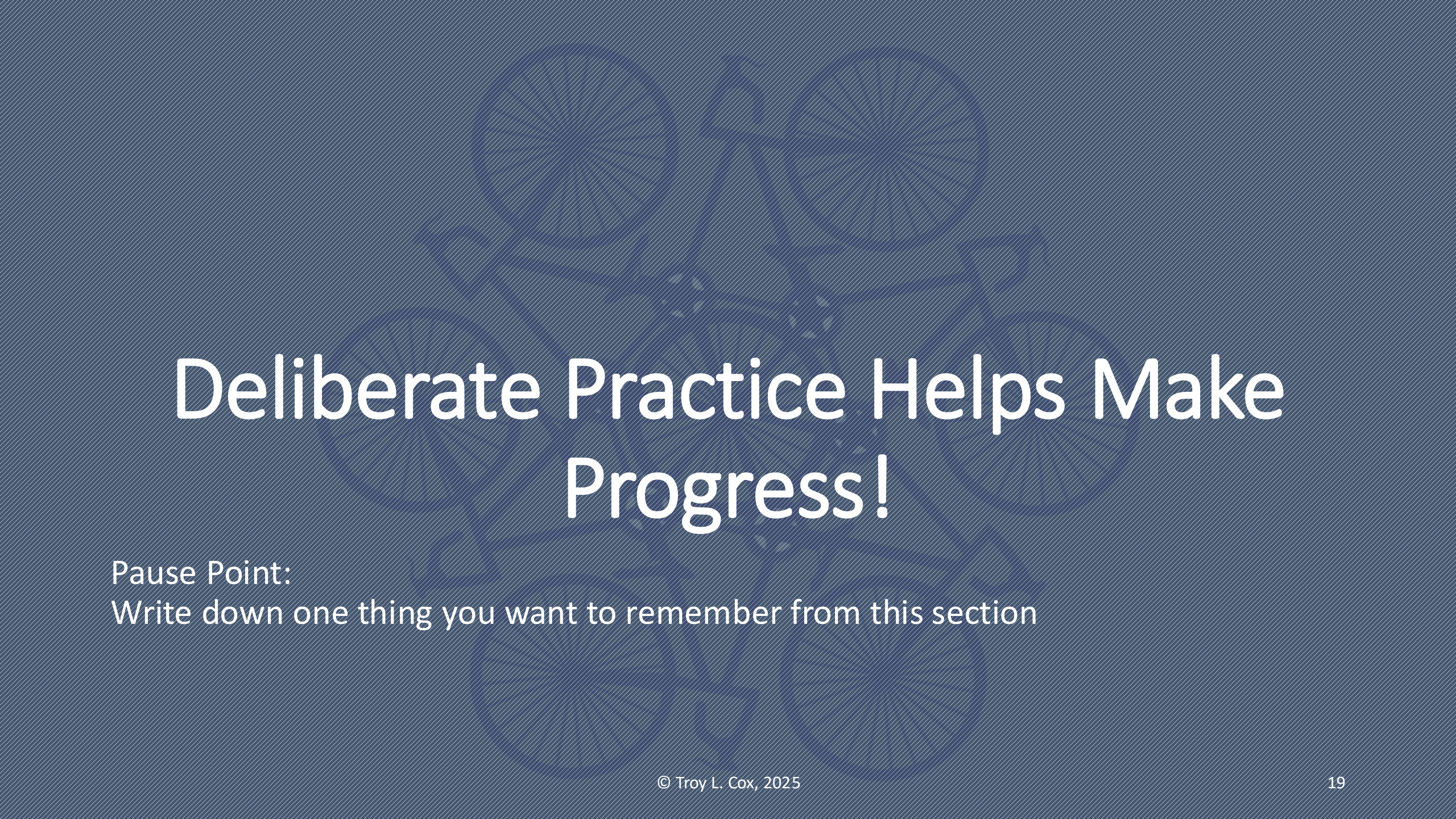
Language Study _____ Minutes

Think Constant Incremental Growth

YOU'RE NOT GOING
IN CIRCLES...



...YOU JUST NEED
TO SEE DIFFERENTLY

The background of the slide features a repeating pattern of stylized bicycles and wheels in a light blue color, set against a darker blue background.

Deliberate Practice Helps Make Progress!

Pause Point:

Write down one thing you want to remember from this section

3. Speak First, Correct Later –Build Confidence by Seeking Discomfort

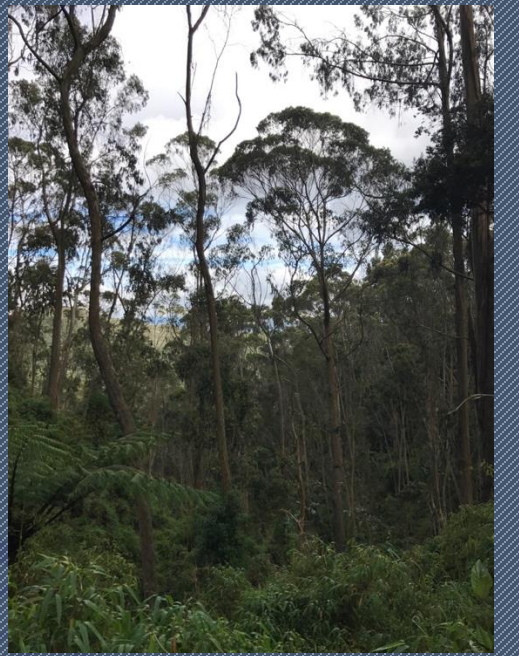
- Fluency requires using language before mastering it.
- Prioritize meaningful communication over perfection.













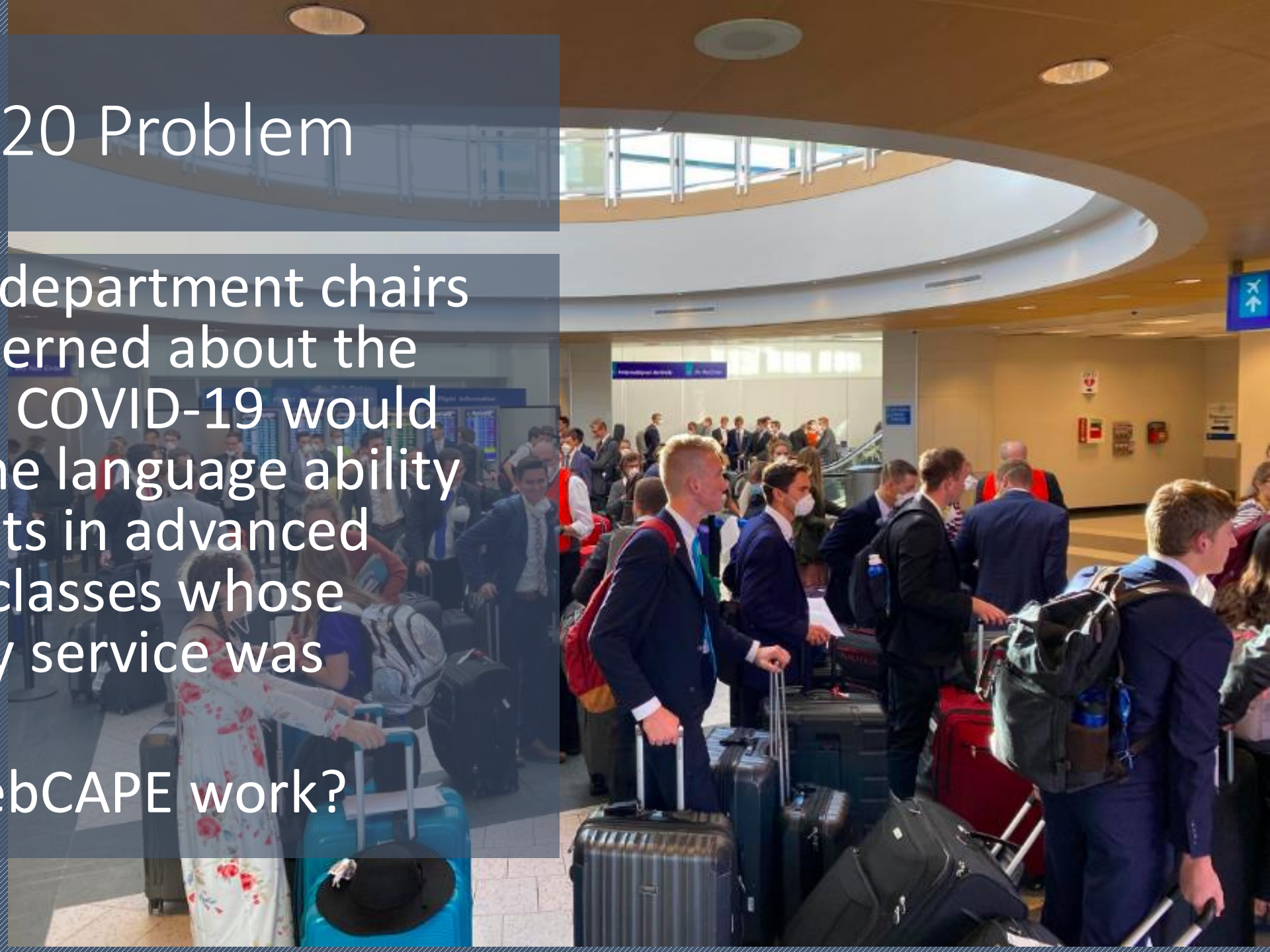
Am I self-aware
and acting on my
own?

Or am I waiting for
someone else to
tell me what to
do?



Spring 2020 Problem

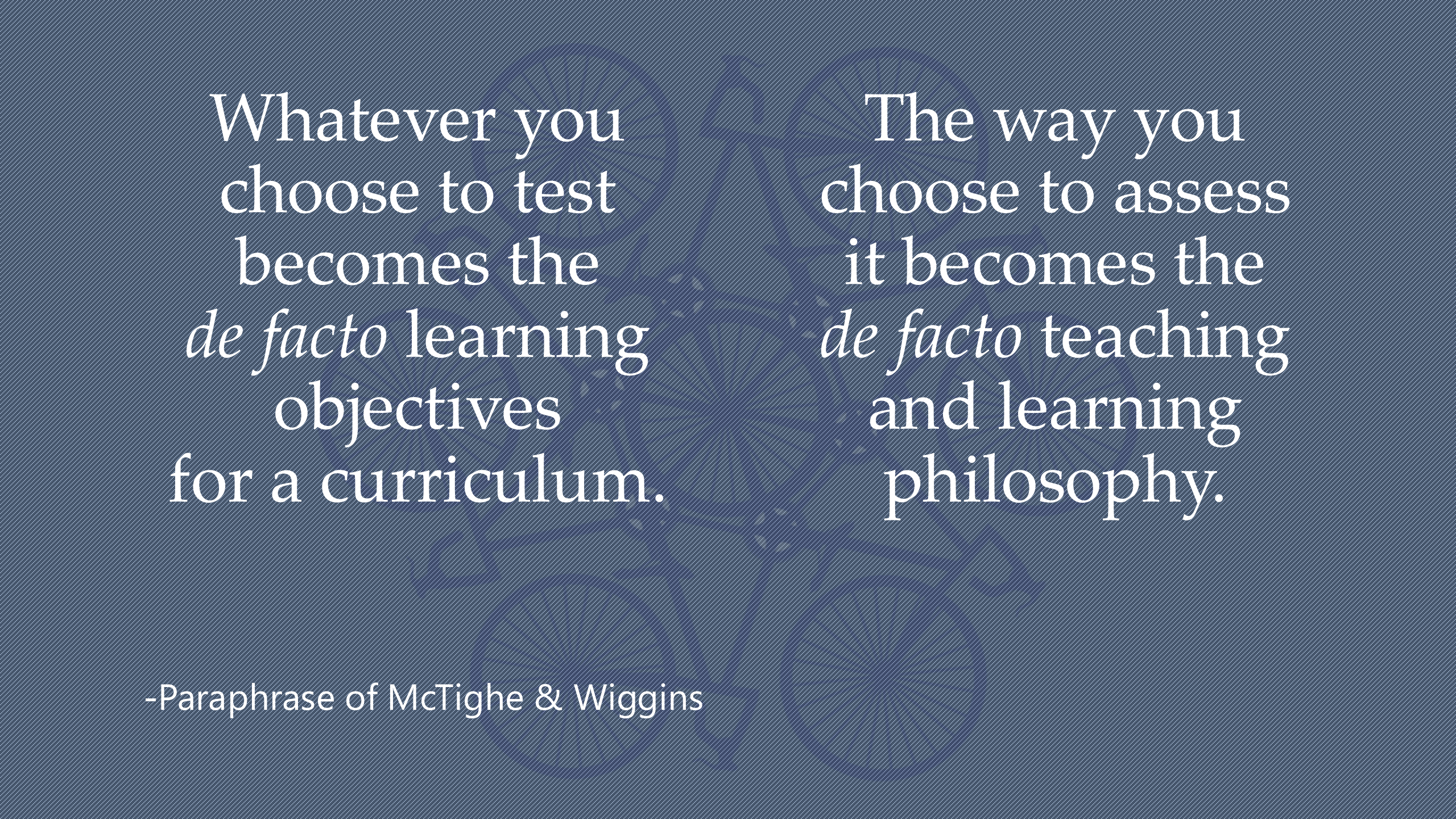
- Language department chairs were concerned about the disruption COVID-19 would have on the language ability for students in advanced language classes whose missionary service was disrupted.
- Would WebCAPE work?



WebCAPE (Web-Computer Adaptive Placement Exam)

- Tests students with MC questions.
- Adaptive algorithm gives each student a unique set of questions at varied difficulty levels to determine score.
- Results are low stake.





Whatever you
choose to test
becomes the
de facto learning
objectives
for a curriculum.

The way you
choose to assess
it becomes the
de facto teaching
and learning
philosophy.

-Paraphrase of McTighe & Wiggins

What's our goal?

- Do we want students that are automatons that need to be told where to go and what to do via external checklists?
- Or do we want to help students become reflective learners that can accurately self-appraise their language and choose what's best for them?

Bloom's Taxonomy

WebCAPE

	Remember	Understand	Apply	Analyze	Evaluate	Create
Factual	– Factual knowledge of terminology. – Factual knowledge of specific details and elements.					
Conceptual	– Knowledge of classifications and categories. – Knowledge of principles and generalizations. – Knowledge of theories, models, and structures.					
Procedural	– Knowledge of subject-specific skills and algorithms. – Knowledge of subject-specific techniques and methods. – Knowledge of criteria for determining when to use appropriate procedures.					
Metacognitive	– Strategic knowledge. – Knowledge about cognitive tasks, including appropriate contextual and conditional knowledge. – Self knowledge.					

How can we create an instrument that assesses different types of knowledge and higher order skills with positive washback?

Bloom's Taxonomy—Metacognitive

- Strategic knowledge
- **Knowledge about cognitive tasks**, including appropriate contextual and conditional knowledge
- Self knowledge

The background of the slide features a repeating pattern of stylized bicycles and wheels in a light blue color, set against a darker blue background. The bicycles are arranged in a way that their wheels and frames create a continuous, interlocking visual effect.

Washback

How can we create tests that tap into those metacognitive skills that encourage lifelong learning and viewing language learning as an infinite game?

What is the LASER?

- The Language Ability Self-Evaluation Resource is a self-assessment diagnostic tool designed to help students evaluate the strengths and weaknesses of their language proficiency through nationally recognized standards.
- As students improve in their ability to self-assess, they will improve in their ability to grow and develop their language proficiency.



laser.byu.edu

Overview

The LASER is designed to help BYU students:

- become life-long language learners as they improve their ability to self-assess and self-reflect on their language proficiency
- Provide recommendations for the appropriate language course for their ability
- verify that they are in the correct class (with instructors' feedback)
- provide information to the instructor to inform curricular decisions

Section 1: Self-report Module (30-40 minutes)

- a. Language Learning Background
- b. Language-learning Grit
- c. Willingness to communicate
- d. Productive Skills Self-assessment

Section 2: Productive Language Samples Module (20-50 minutes)

- a. Writing Test and Self-assessment
- b. Speaking Test and Self-assessment
- c. Reflection on performance (after each writing or speaking response)

Scale Design and Description

	LASER (Rasch Reliability = .94)
Construct	Indirect measure Speaking and Writing proficiency
Format	Section 1 (Fixed form) • Language Learning Background • Language Learning Grit (9 items, 5 pt. scale) • Willingness to Communicate (26 items (random subset, 100% time scale) • Self-Assessment of Speaking and Writing (24 items, 5 pt. Scale) Section 2 (items targeted at the self assessed level from section 1) • Writing and Speaking
Languages	Can be adapted for most languages
Results	ACTFL scale (10 Point) from NL to S (not official). Self-assess results moderated by language learning background, length of immersion, and distance from English. Sent to both student and instructors who have (hopefully) been trained in the proficiency scale
Delivery	Qualtrics (not proctored) troycox.xyz

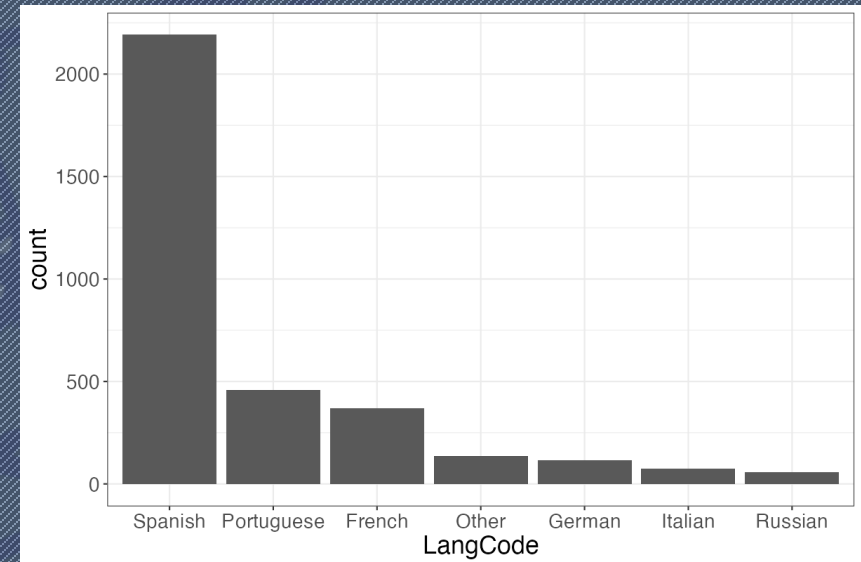
Why include WTC?

- Willingness to Communicate (WTC) is a personality trait that dictates the degree of predisposition to consistently communicate across a variety of different situations (McCroskey & Baer, 1985)
- Includes both long-term, permanent variables (traits) and short-term, dynamic variables (states; MacIntyre et al, 1998)
- If we believe WTC helps with language acquisition, then wouldn't we want to encourage it?

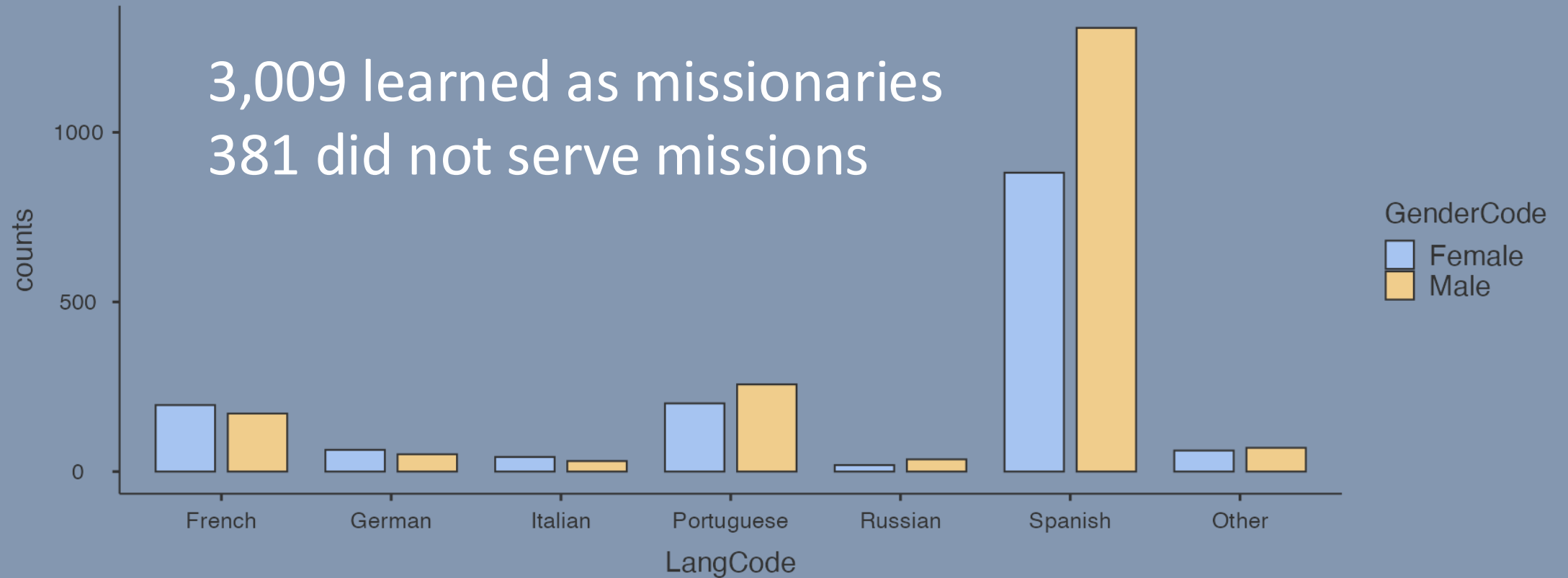
Participants

Studying a foreign language at a large US University and took LASER

- Spanish (n = 2,189)
- Portuguese (n = 458)
- French (n = 367)
- German (n = 115)
- Italian (n = 74)
- Russian (n = 55)
- Other (n = 132)
 - Chinese, Danish, Dutch, Finnish, Indonesian, Japanese, Lithuanian, Norwegian, Swedish, Thai



Gender

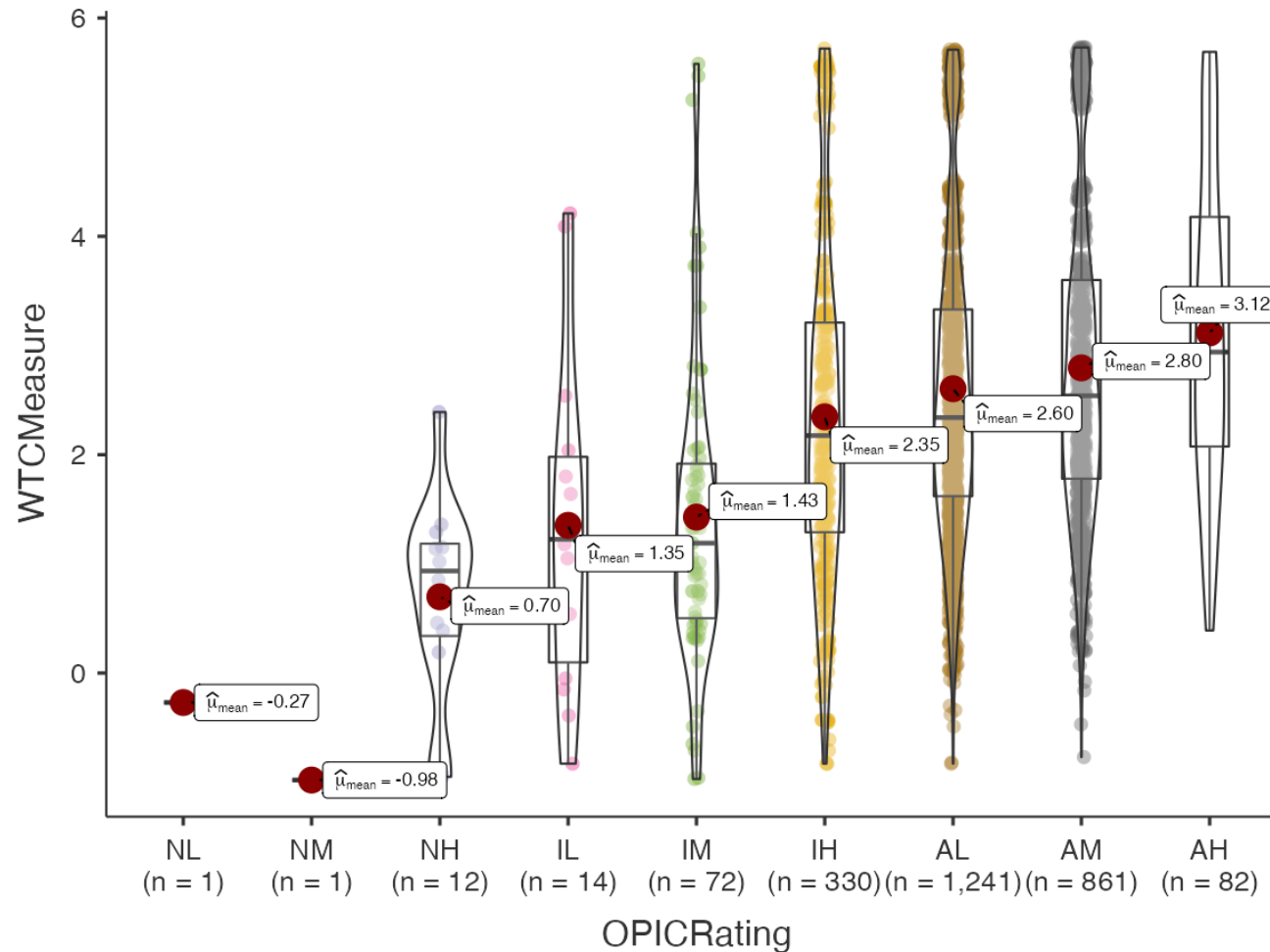


Instruments

- Oral Proficiency Interview-Computer (OPIc)
- WTC Instrument
 - WTC section of LASER
 - Section 1—Speaking with native speakers in the participant's home country (k = 6 of 6)
 - Section 2 (new)—Communicating with native speakers online (k = 4 of 7)
 - Section 3—Speaking with L2 TL speakers in a school setting (k = 3 of 5)
 - Section 4—Speaking with L2 TL speakers abroad (k = 4 of 8)

WTC and Proficiency

$[F(8, 2605) = 16, p < .001]$



The only adjacent rating that is significantly different is between IM and IH (Tukey difference = .92, $p < .001$)

BUT

$r = .2$ ($p < .001$)

R-squared = .047-small effect size

On Polyglots in Adam Grant's book *Hidden Potential*

- The people he references in the book
 - weren't exceptional students in school,
 - nor did they possess exceptionally high IQs.
- Their secret?
 - They seek discomfort.
- The more uncomfortable they are when learning a new language, the more they are learning.
- More discomfort equals more mistakes.
- More mistakes equal more learning opportunities and less chance of repeating them.

Speak First, Correct Later —Build Confidence by Seeking Discomfort

Pause Point:

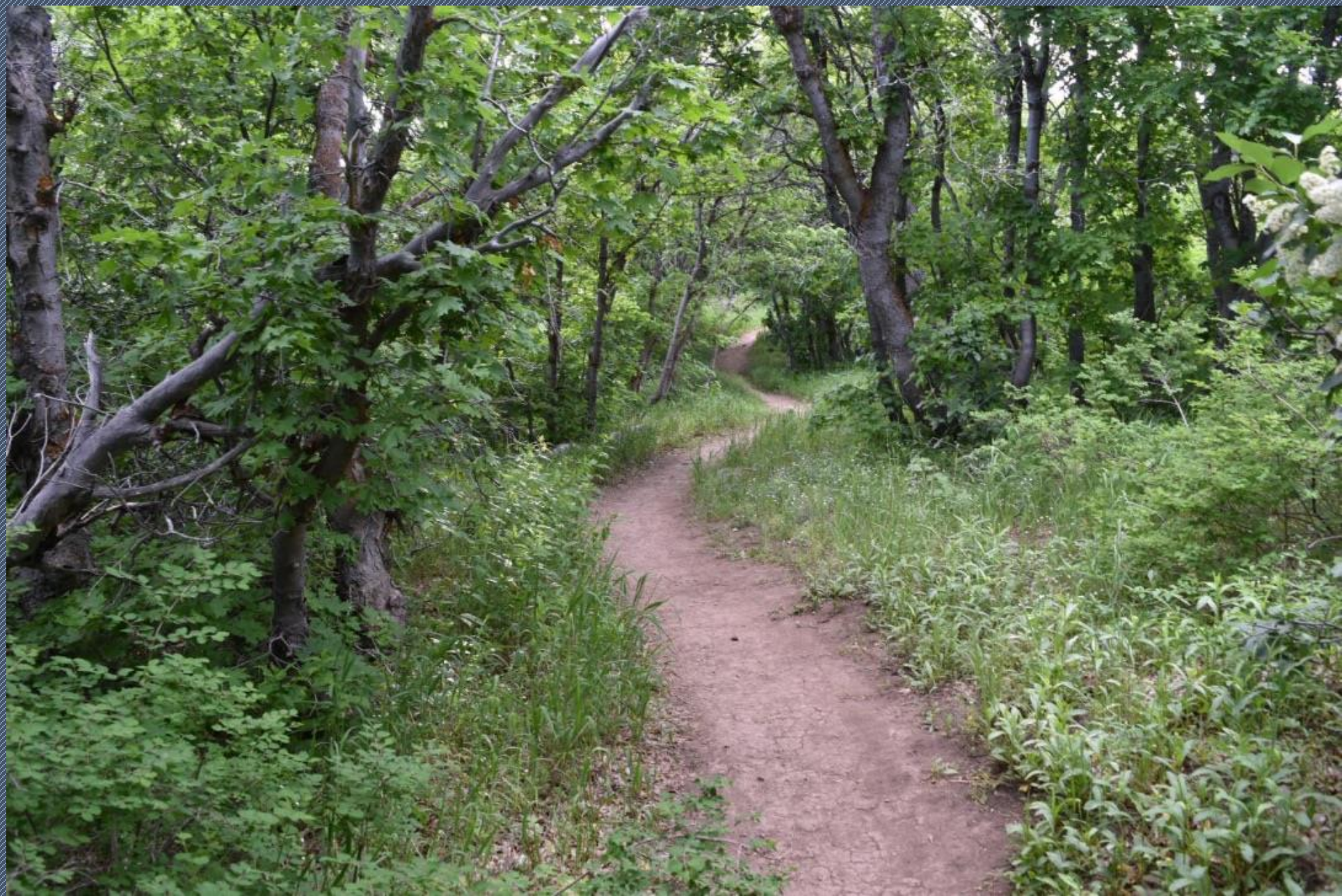
Write down one thing you want to remember from this section

4. Using Feedback as a Tool, Not a Judgment

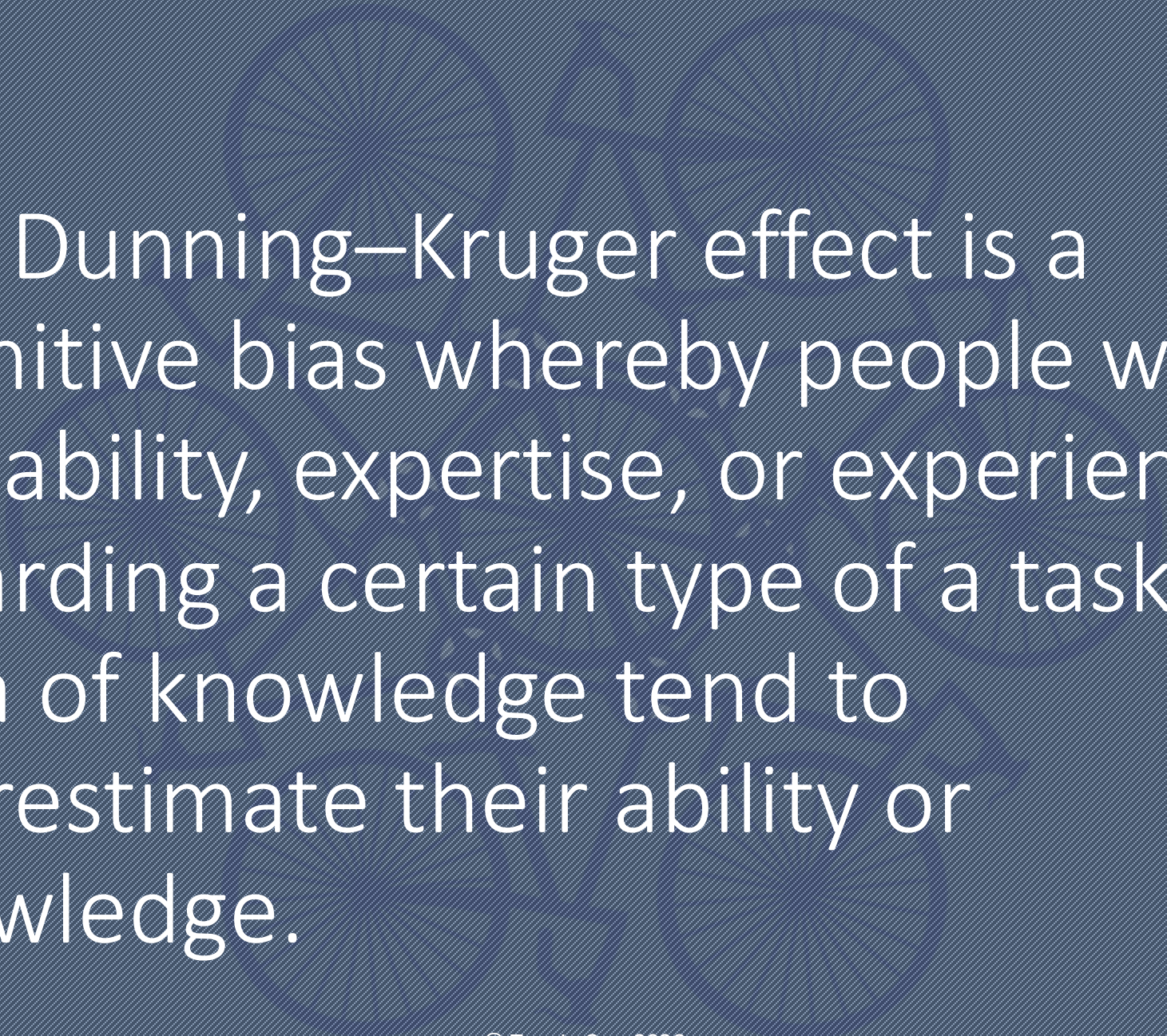


- Mistakes are data. Feedback is fuel.
- Be proactive in seeking correction—don't wait for perfection.



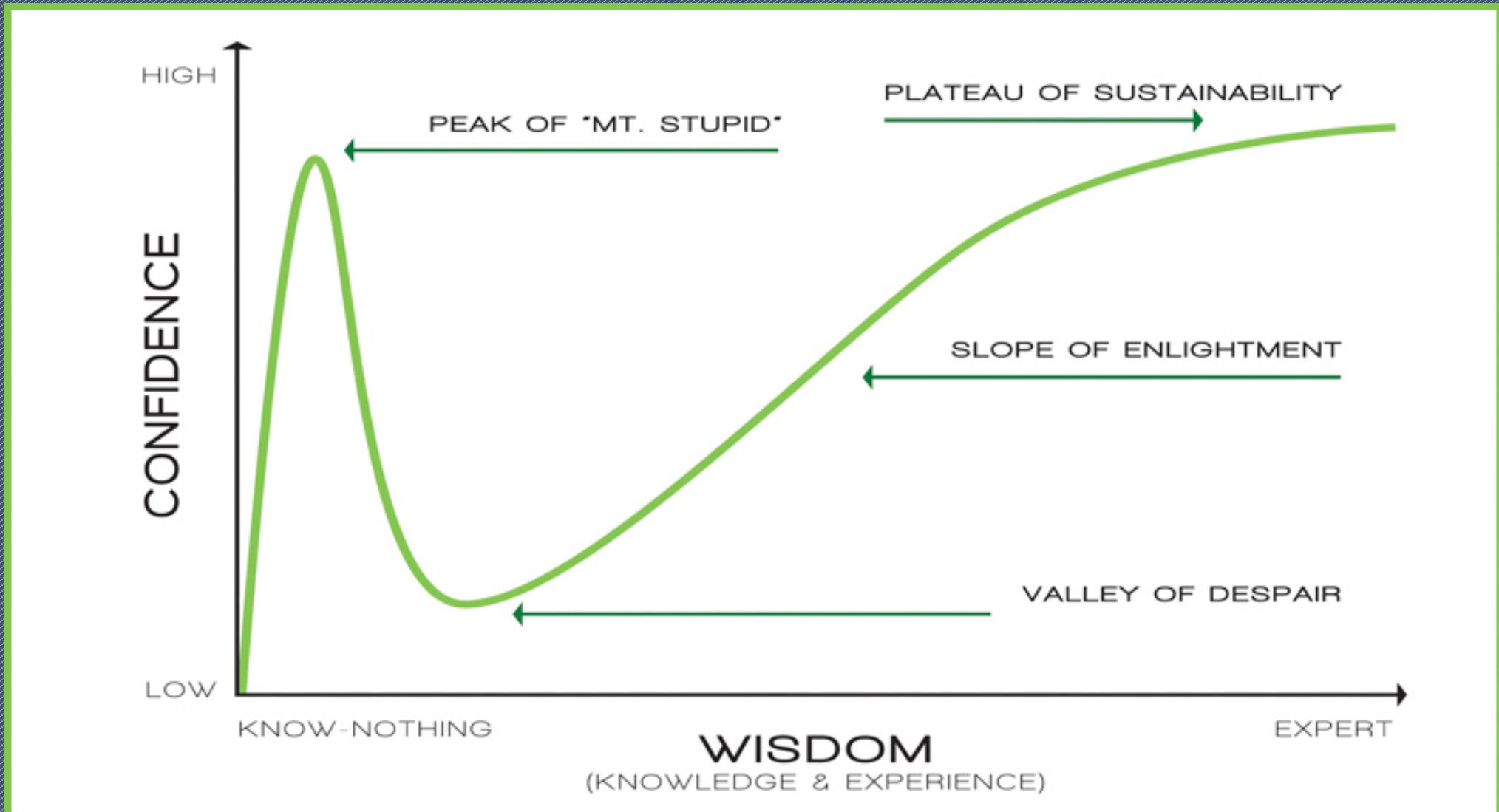


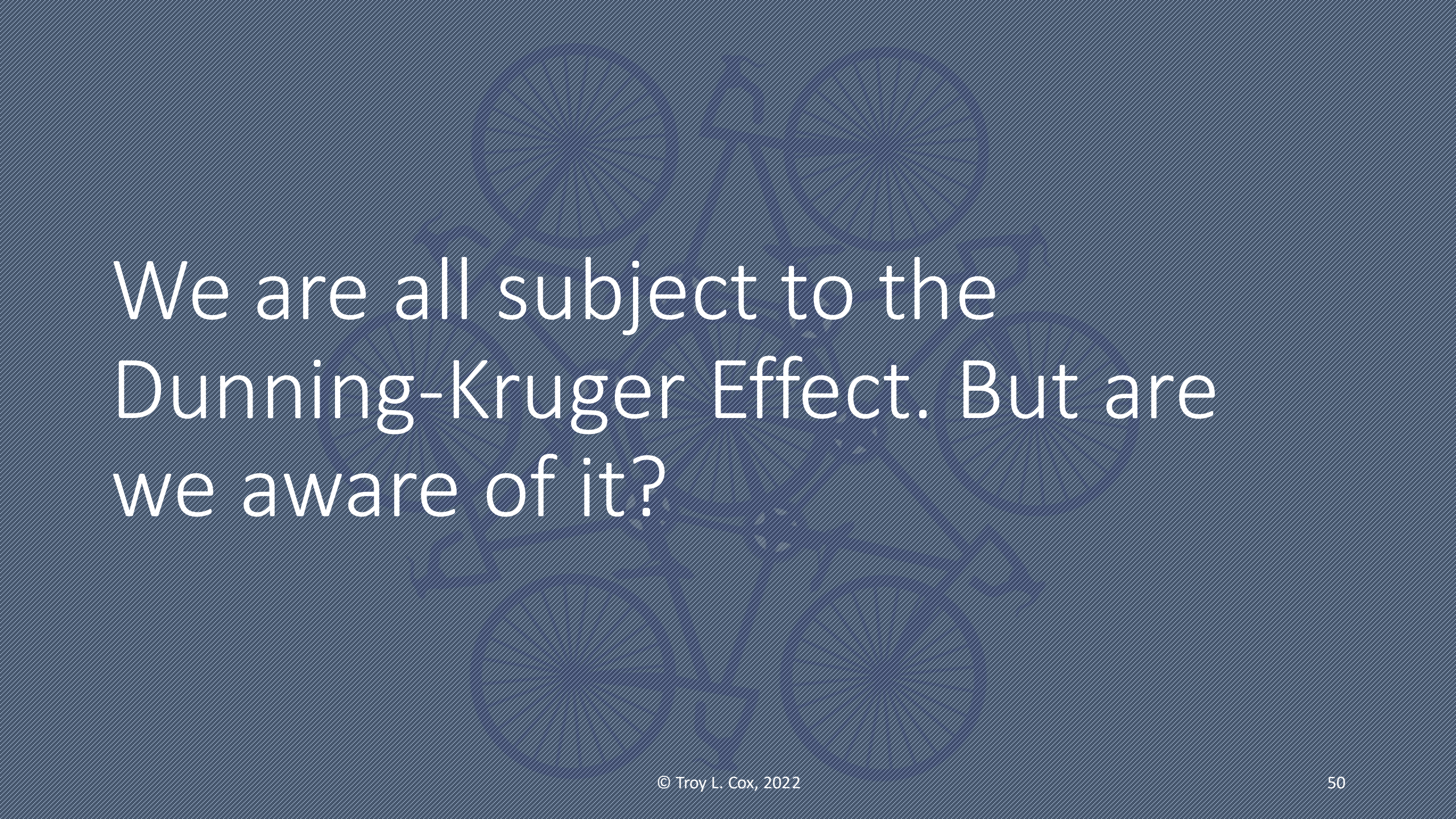


The background of the slide features a large, faint, light-blue watermark of a bicycle. The bicycle is oriented horizontally and is centered behind the text. It has a classic diamond frame, two large spoked wheels, a seat, and handlebars.

The Dunning–Kruger effect is a cognitive bias whereby people with low ability, expertise, or experience regarding a certain type of a task or area of knowledge tend to overestimate their ability or knowledge.

Surprising? Not Really...



The background of the slide features a repeating pattern of stylized bicycles and wheels in a light blue color, set against a darker blue background. The text is centered and reads:

We are all subject to the
Dunning-Kruger Effect. But are
we aware of it?

Research Question

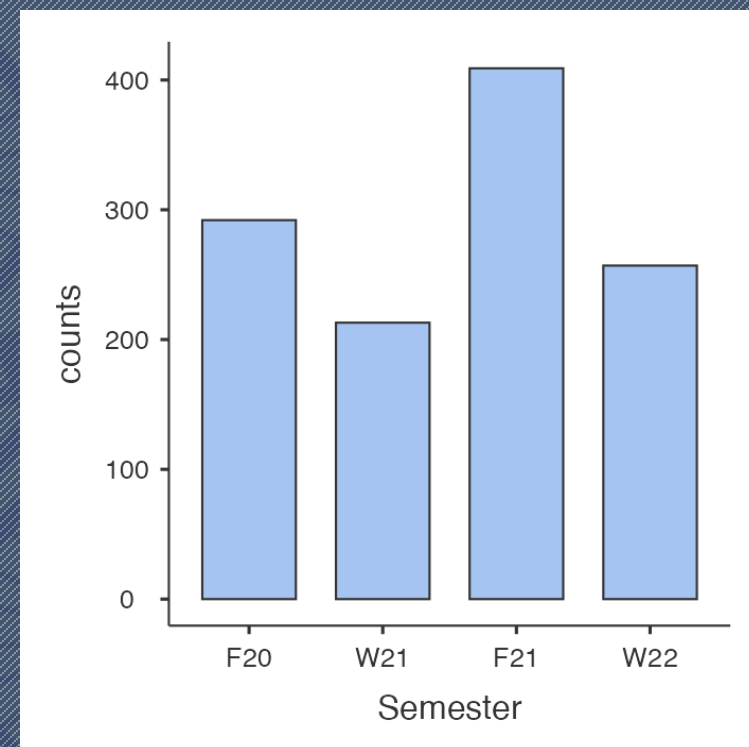
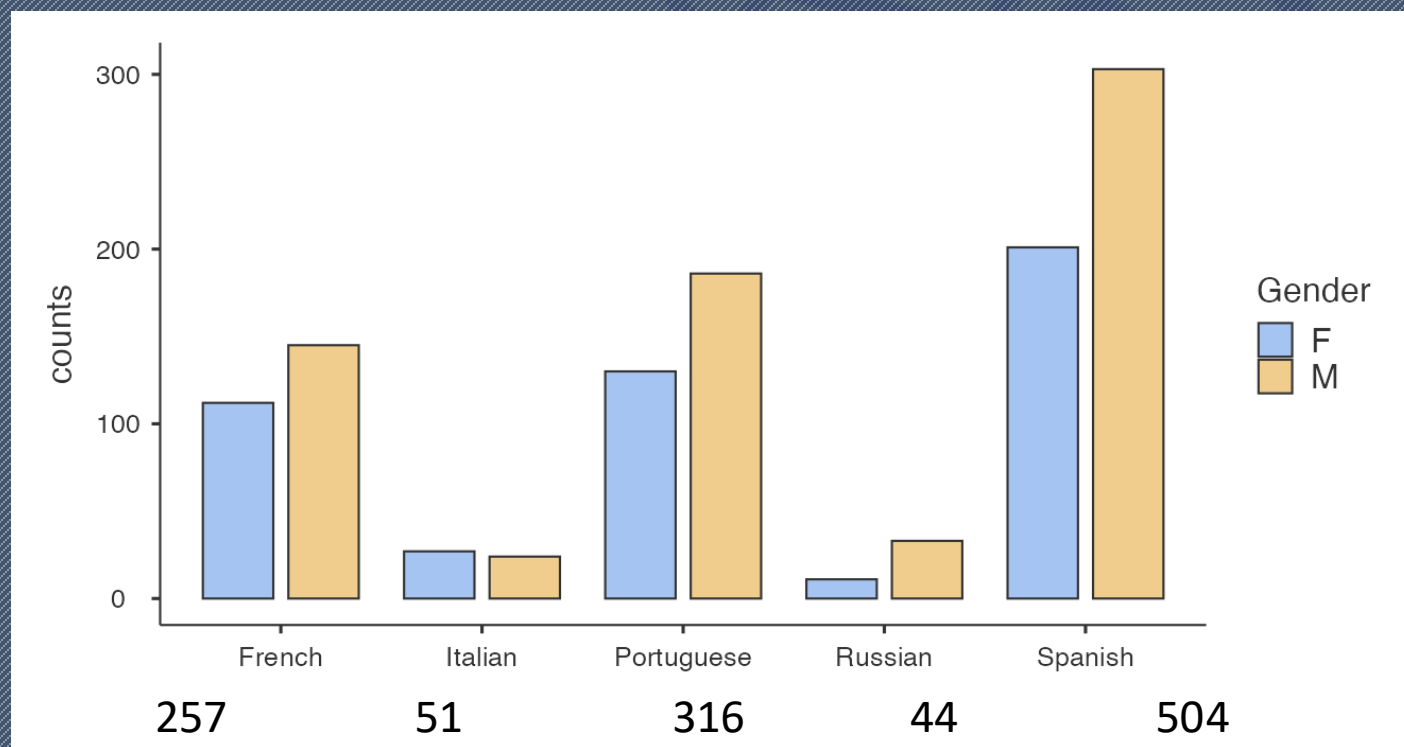
- RQ2a—What effect does proficiency level have on calibration in speaking?
 - RQ2b—Writing?

Materials

- LASER-Language Ability Self-assessment Evaluation Resource
- OPIc- Oral proficiency Interview-computer
- WPT-Writing Proficiency Test

Participants

- 1,172 (691 male, 481 female) over 4 semesters



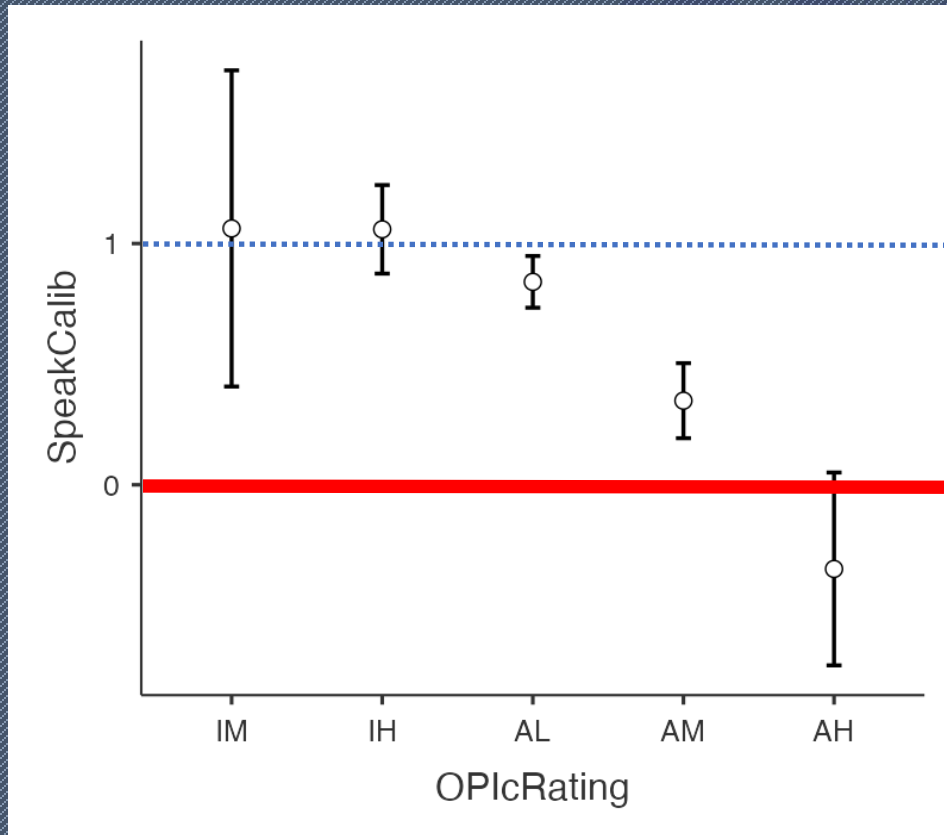
	Counts	% of Total
F20	292	24.9 %
W21	213	18.2 %
F21	409	34.9 %
W22	257	21.9 %

Calculating Calibration

- Calibration = OPIc Rating – Self Assessed Rating

Value	Meaning
0	Perfectly calibrated. No difference between perceived and actual ability.
Positive Numbers	Students OVER-estimate their ability.
Negative Numbers	Students UNDER-estimate their ability

Speaking Calibration



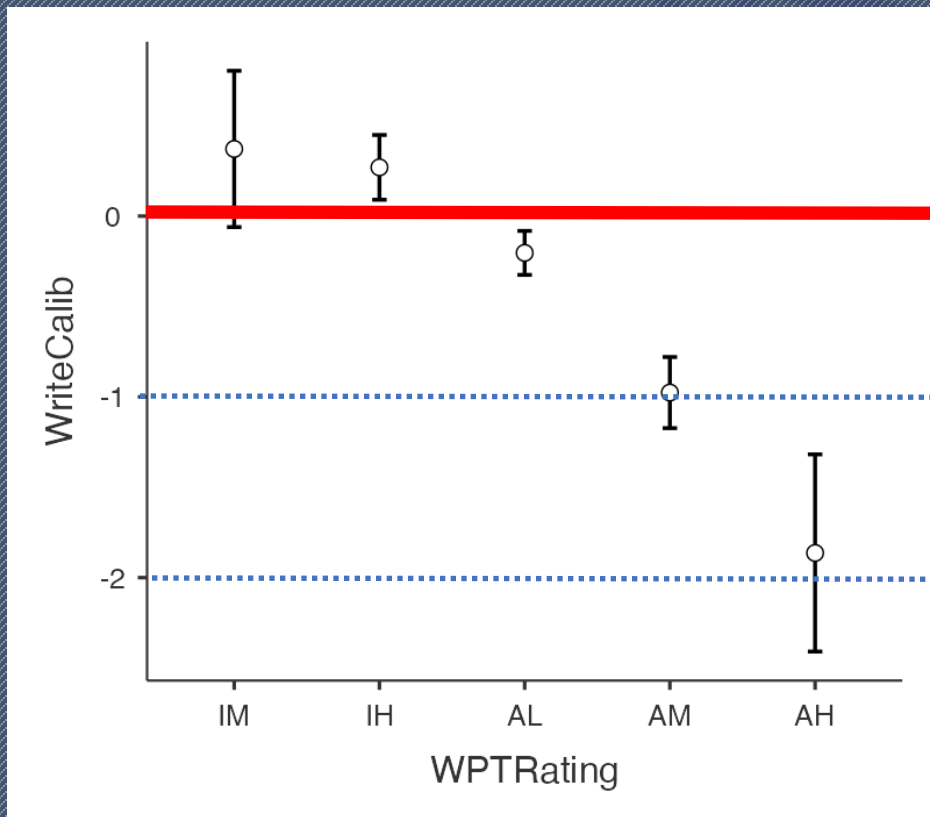
Each integer represents ONE sublevel.

ANOVA

$$F(4, 1140) = 17.1, p < .001$$

	N	Mean	SE	Lower	Upper
IM	16	1.06	0.33	0.41	1.72
IH	205	1.06	0.09	0.88	1.24
AL	602	0.84	0.05	0.73	0.95
AM	286	0.35	0.08	0.19	0.50
AH	43	-0.35	0.20	-0.75	0.05

Writing Calibration



Each integer represents ONE sublevel.

ANOVA

$$F(4, 867) = 31.8, p < .001$$

WPTRating	95% Confidence Interval			
	Mean	SE	Lower	Upper
IM	0.37	0.22	-0.06	0.80
IH	0.27	0.09	0.09	0.45
AL	-0.20	0.06	-0.33	-0.08
AM	-0.98	0.10	-1.17	-0.78
AH	-1.86	0.28	-2.41	-1.32

The background of the slide features a repeating pattern of stylized bicycles and wheels in a light blue color, set against a darker blue background.

Use Feedback as a Tool, Not a Judgment

Pause Point:

Write down one thing you want to remember from this section

5. Create a Personalized Growth Plan (Including a Mistake Quota)

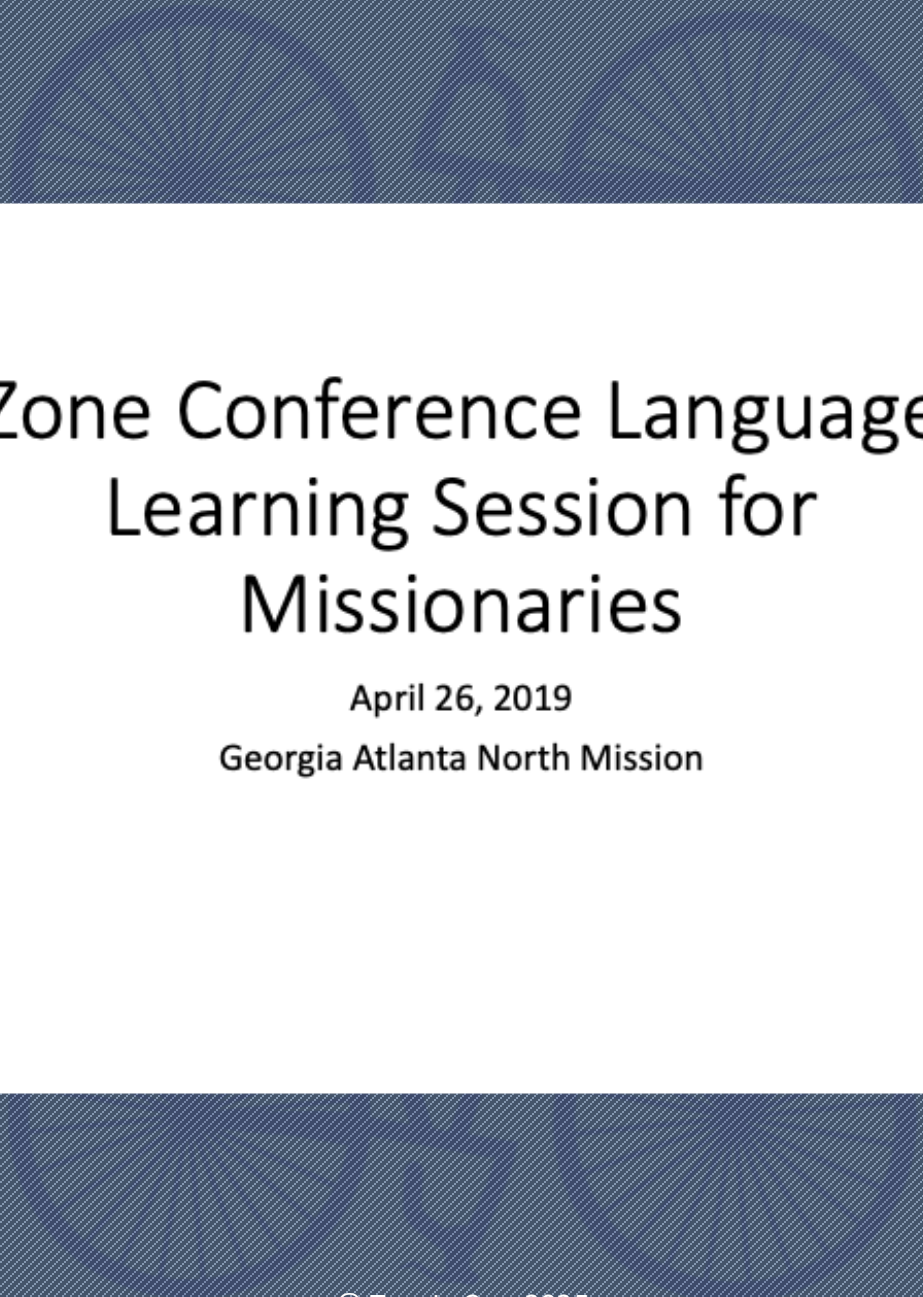


- Combine strategic planning with a willingness to fail.
- Use the FACTs framework: Function, Accuracy, Content, Text Type

One of the Challenges I Gave to Elder McKee

For every principle of the gospel in the discussions, think of a personal experience that can be shared.

1. Write it out in English first.
 1. You can keep this for your own family history.
 2. You need something to talk about
2. Write it in your mission language
3. **Get feedback from native speakers on...**
 1. ways to combine sentences and
 2. grammatical errors
4. Rewrite your personal account
5. Practice telling the story aloud.



Zone Conference Language Learning Session for Missionaries

April 26, 2019

Georgia Atlanta North Mission

Deliberate Practice

1. Notice Everything
2. Make Goals
3. Seek Input
4. Practice Output
5. Get Feedback
6. **Vary modes, topics and time between tasks**

Vary modes, topics and time between tasks

- Language acquisition is almost always a process of:
Conceptual Control—>Partial Control—>Full Control
- Be patient with imperfection
- You will always get better if you are mindful and making goals
- Once you become complacent, you will fossilize in your errors and you will have to unlearn them to progress.
- Real world communication is the key. Draw on your own life experiences for content.

A Mistake Quota

- If you aren't pushing yourself to the point that you notice mistakes, you are likely seeking comfort (the ACTFL floor level)
- Decide to push yourself

Cox, T. L. (2025). *Called to Serve, Called to Speak*.
Provo, UT: Y Mountain
Press



The background of the slide features a repeating pattern of stylized bicycles and wheels in a light blue color, set against a darker blue background.

Create a Personalized Growth Plan (Including a Mistake Quota)

Pause Point:

Write down one thing you want to remember from this section

What can the gift of healing teach us about the gift of tongues?

- Latter-day Saints believe in applying the best available scientific knowledge and techniques. We use nutrition, exercise, and other practices to preserve health, and we enlist the help of healing practitioners, such as physicians and surgeons, to restore health.

Healing the Sick

Elder Dallin H. Oaks

April, 2010

<https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/general-conference/2010/04/healing-the-sick?lang=eng>

What can the gift of healing teach us about the gift of tongues? (cont.)

- The use of medical science is not at odds with our prayers of faith and our reliance on priesthood blessings. When a person requested a priesthood blessing, Brigham Young would ask, “Have you used any remedies?” To those who said no because “we wish the Elders to lay hands upon us, and we have faith that we shall be healed,” President Young replied: “That is very inconsistent according to my faith. If we are sick, and ask the Lord to heal us, and to do all for us that is necessary to be done, according to my understanding of the Gospel of salvation, I might as well ask the Lord to cause my wheat and corn to grow, without my plowing the ground and casting in the seed. It appears consistent to me to apply every remedy that comes within the range of my knowledge, and [then] to ask my Father in Heaven ... to sanctify that application to the healing of my body.”.

Healing the Sick

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What can the gift of healing teach us about the gift of tongues? (cont.)

- Of course we don't wait until all other methods are exhausted before we pray in faith or give priesthood blessings for healing. In emergencies, prayers and blessings come first. Most often we pursue all efforts simultaneously. This follows the scriptural teachings that we should "pray always" ([D&C 90:24](#)) and that all things should be done in wisdom and order.

Healing the Sick

Elder Dallin H. Oaks

April, 2010

<https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/general-conference/2010/04/healing-the-sick?lang=eng>

Concluding Thoughts

- **Failure is Essential for Language Learning**
- **Deliberate Practice Helps Make Progress**
- **Speak First, Correct Later –Build Confidence by Seeking Discomfort**
- **Use Feedback as a Tool, Not a Judgment**
- **Create a Personalized Growth Plan (Including a Mistake Quota)**

Slides



Book

