

Introduction to the ACTFL Standards and the OPI (Oral Proficiency Interview)

I. Proficiency-oriented assessments

Achievement vs. Proficiency testing
written driving test; road test

criterion-referenced assessment/test

- compare what students do to a set of criteria
- norm-referenced testing
- compare students to each other

with criteria-based test, can compare across courses, institutions, etc.

- what does 2nd-year mean across universities?
- he studied for 6 months and got As?
- vs. she's an INT-mid speaker of the language
- FLAS evaluations are now criteria-based

backwash

- effect that testing has on teaching
- “teaching for the test”
- positive/beneficial when the kind of testing you are doing matches the kind of teaching you are doing
- negative when testing and teaching are at odds

2. Looking at existing criteria

Level	ILR/FSI Levels (1950s US Gov't)	ACTFL (1980s-present)	CEFR
5	Functionally Native or Bilingual Proficiency	(Distinguished)	
4+	Advanced Professional Proficiency Plus		
4	Advanced Professional Proficiency		
3+	General Professional Proficiency Plus		
3	General Professional Proficiency	Superior	C2
2+	Limited Working Proficiency Plus	Advanced-HIGH	C1
2	Limited Working Proficiency	Advanced-MID	B2
		Advanced-LOW	B1.2
1+	Elementary Proficiency Plus	Intermediate-HIGH	B1
1	Elementary Proficiency	Intermediate-MID	A2.2
		Intermediate-LOW	A2
0+	Memorized Proficiency	Novice-HIGH	A1
0	No Practical Proficiency	Novice-MID	
		Novice-LOW	

ILR = Interagency Language Roundtable

FSI = Foreign Service Institute

ACTFL = American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages

OPI = Oral Proficiency Interview

ILR distinguishes more at the top levels (professionals, diplomats, gov't employees)

ACTFL distinguishes more at the bottom levels (college or high school students)

Outline of characteristics at each level

NOVICE

- rehearsed material, lists, phrases, fragments, memorized
- lists of nouns and verbs produced: clothing, food, self, weather, daily activity, hobbies
- Novice-LOW knows maybe 25 words or less
- more like achievement than proficiency test at this level
- hard to understand except by highly sympathetic listeners (e.g., teachers)

INTERMEDIATE

- face-to-face conversation
- produces sentences
- familiar, everyday topics
- here and now; me me me
- still requires a sympathetic listener
- create, ask/answer questions, simple (role-play) situations

ADVANCED

- more cohesive, organized
- comfortable in different time frames (different from tenses)
- the personal and the general, public
- e.g., How does public transportation work? Describe the political parties.
- narration, description, situation (role-play) with complication
- accuracy much improved; anyone can understand an advanced speaker
- they still make errors, but the errors do not impede communication for the most part
- content is still anecdotal

SUPERIOR

- state and support opinion
- hypothesize, abstractions
- global, not anecdotal
- linguistically unfamiliar situations (circumlocution)
- errors, but no patterns of errors; errors don't "bother" native speakers
- This sort of testing is for adults; younger speakers don't necessarily have the conceptual abilities required for superior.
- Native speakers are not always at or even capable of speaking on the SUPERIOR level

Common European Framework of Reference for Languages

- CEFR Scale (European Union)
- Both ACTFL and CEFR are based on what students can do
- functional theory of language
- can be used as self assessment
- CEFR scale originated from teacher descriptions of student skills
- ACTFL has been around 30 years, research-backed, validity studies, correlated
- CEFR scale is relatively new, very little research
- ACTFL OPI testing is tightly controlled for training, who can test, certification, etc.

Anecdote from a colleague...

- after 6 months of German at Middlebury and Freiburg, a student was evaluated as C1 (Advanced-High); no way that's reliable or accurate!

Homework: Work with a colleague in the same language (if possible) to create banks of items for each level, including questions and role plays. Try to create “spirals” that move up levels within topics. Keep track of cultural and linguistic issues.

I. Another look at the assessment criteria

How do the FLAS criteria fit?

Level	ILR/FSI Levels (1950s US Gov't)	ACTFL (1980s-present)	CEFR
5	Functionally Native or Bilingual Proficiency	(Distinguished)	C2
4+	Advanced Professional Proficiency Plus		
4	Advanced Professional Proficiency		
3+	General Professional Proficiency Plus		
3	General Professional Proficiency		
2+	Limited Working Proficiency Plus	Advanced-HIGH	C1
2	Limited Working Proficiency	Advanced-MID	B2
1+	Elementary Proficiency Plus	Advanced-LOW	B1.2
1	Elementary Proficiency	Intermediate-HIGH	B1
0+	Memorized Proficiency	Intermediate-MID	A2.2
0	No Practical Proficiency	Intermediate-LOW	A2
		Novice-HIGH	A1
		Novice-MID	
		Novice-LOW	

Refer to Table II in the handouts.

Refer to the

2. Structure of the OPI

Refer to Table IV in the handouts.

Interview Structure:

- **WARM-UP:** interviewee hears the language and settles comfortably into it; tester gathers topics, gauges interests, gains preliminary idea about language ability
- **ITERATIVE PROCESS:** LEVEL CHECKS and PROBES to establish FLOOR and CEILING; probe up for LINGUISTIC BREAKDOWN; sustained performance at floor is required
- **ROLE PLAY:** towards the end; used to establish certain abilities not easily obtained in the conversational format of the OPI
- **WIND-DOWN:** brings interviewee back down to level of comfort, a few additional exchanges to close the interview, yes/no questions, closed questions, leaves interviewee with sense of accomplishment

NOTE: All interviews begin with the assumption that a conversation will take place, i.e. Intermediate level

Question Types

(expanded from handout on question types)

- What is this? [display question, right or wrong answer] or What is the first day of the week? What day is today?
VS What do you have on your desk at home? What days do you work? What do you have in your backpack?
- Do you live in a house? Do you like sports? [yes/no questions]
- Do you live in a house or an apartment? Do you like football or basketball?

- *Tell me about the place where you live. Why do you like sports?* [elicits sentences, not just one word, yes/no answers, gives you an idea of a level, not just some answers]
- *Tell me about the place where you live. Now tell me about your favorite room in your house. [follow up for more detail] Can you describe the person in your family you're closest to? Could you tell me more about that?*
- *Can you describe your daily routine?*
VS *What do you do every day?* [rephrasing, in the event that the question was not understood]
- *I've asked you a lot of questions—are there any questions you would like to ask me?* [easy to get an answer: No.]
VS *We've been talking about your family—why don't you ask me a few questions about my family.* [intermediate requirement, ability to ask and answer questions; this elicits question asking]

moving into advanced level and above...

- *You said your family takes a vacation every summer. What did you do last summer?* [won't necessarily get you a story, which is a requirement for advanced]
VS *Can you tell about something that happened to your family that you'll never forget?* [this type of question elicits a story]
- *What are your plans for this weekend?*
VS *How do you see your life 5 years from now?* [need to elicit description and narration in multiple time frames]
- *I've never been to that city, would you tell me about it?*
VS *How would you compare Moscow and Chicago?* [description and comparison]
- *What would you do if you won a million dollars?*
VS *How would winning the lottery change your life?*
- *Discuss the pros and cons of recycling.*
VS *Some people refuse to recycle. Why do you think that is?*
- *Would you explain how you go about analyzing a literary text?*
VS *You're a runner? What is important to you when you buy a new pair of running shoes?*

Role plays

- Superior (support opinions, hypothesize, discuss abstract topics, linguistically unfamiliar situations)
 - Advanced (situation/transaction with a complication; narrate, describe)
 - Intermediate (simple situation/transaction; create with language; ask/answer questions)
- NOTE: Role plays are mandatory parts of the OPI at levels from Novice-HIGH through Advanced-MID

INTERMEDIATE

- Can create with language
- Participate in a simple conversation by asking and answering questions
- Handles a simple situation or social transaction without complication
- Sympathetic listener
- Discrete sentences

<p>You want to buy tickets for a special event. Call the ticket office and ask questions about the event and the tickets. I will play the part of the ticket office employee.</p>	<p>While in [city], you need to do some shopping, so you go to the city's largest mall/department store/market/bazaar. At the entrance you run into a friend who has been to this mall/store/market/bazaar many times. Greet your friend. Then ask several questions to get all the information you need to make your shopping trip a success. I will play the part of your friend.</p>
<p>You want to order a clothing item from a mail catalog. Call the company, find out the information you need in order to order the merchandise on the phone. I will play the part of the customer representative.</p>	<p>While in [city or country], you attend an annual music/art/film/cultural festival. At the festival, you run into a friend who has been to this festival many times before. Ask your friend several questions to find out everything you need to know to make your day at the festival fun and enjoyable. I will play the part of your friend.</p>
<p>You want to move to _____. Call a real estate person to get information about possible properties to buy/rent. Get as much information as possible. I will play the part of the real estate agent.</p>	<p>You are living in [city or country]. Your son/daughter will be attending the local school. You go to meet the principal/school director/teacher. Briefly describe your son/daughter. Then ask several questions to get more information about the school. I will play the part of the principal/school director/teacher.</p>
<p>You are visiting a new area for the first time. You go to the visitor information center. Ask several questions to get all of the information you need to make your visit a success. I will play the part of the visitor center employee.</p>	<p>A friend of yours just got a new car/bike/cell phone/computer/video game system/etc. Ask your friend several questions to get more information about his/her new purchase. I will play the part of your friend.</p>
<p>You are on a bus/plane/train. You notice that the person sitting next to you is reading a new book. This is a title that you are also interested in. Introduce yourself. Then ask several questions to find out more about the book. I will play the part of the person sitting next to you.</p>	<p>You call a restaurant in [city or country]. You have several questions about the menu and about making a reservation. Ask the restaurant employee your questions. I will play the part of the restaurant employee.</p>
<p>You just moved into an apartment in [city]. You meet one of your new neighbors in the elevator/stairwell/entryway/etc. Introduce yourself. Then ask several questions to get some more information about the apartment building, the neighborhood, and the city in general. I will play the part of your new neighbor.</p>	

ADVANCED

- Can narrate, describe, compare in all time frames
- Can handle a situation with complication
- Non-sympathetic listener
- Cohesive, organized language

<p>When you arrive at the airport in [city or country], you go to pick up your rental car. The rental car clerk informs you that they have no record of your reservation. You absolutely require a car to continue your trip. Try to resolve this situation. I will play the part of the rental car clerk.</p>	<p>You recently bought a computer/cell phone and it is already malfunctioning. Call the seller and explain the problem. Try to get the computer/cell phone repaired. I will play the part of the customer service representative.</p>
<p>You are working at a company in [city or country]. Due to an unusual and unexpected situation with your car/the train/the bus/the metro/the city traffic, you miss a very important meeting. You arrive just as the meeting is ending. Explain, in detail, the situation that delayed you, and find out what you need to do to make up for what you missed. I will play the part of the meeting organizer.</p>	<p>You bought tickets to see a performance/show and have to pick up the tickets. When you get to the box office, you realize that you do not have the claim number or identification to claim the tickets. Speak to the agent, explain the situation and try to get your tickets. I will play the part of the box office agent.</p>
<p>You have just started a new job in [city or country]. On your second day, you receive an urgent phone call that requires you to leave work four hours early. Go to your boss /supervisor and explain the situation. Then offer some suggestions as to how you will make up for the missed time and work. I will play the part of your boss/supervisor.</p>	<p>After you arrive in the airport in _____, you discover that your luggage was lost. Go to the baggage claim office and report the problem and try to find a solution to the problem. I will play the part of the baggage office representative.</p>
<p>While going over your monthly credit card statement, you notice that you have still not received credit for an item that you returned to the store several weeks ago. Call the credit card company, explain the situation, and try to resolve the problem. I will play the part of the credit card representative.</p>	<p>You reserved two adjacent seats on a flight to _____. When you pick up the boarding passes at the airport, you realize that the seat assignments do not match the reservations you made and that you and your travel companion will be separated. Go to the airline counter and try to get the original seats. I will play the part of the airline employee.</p>
<p>While visiting a friend's Facebook/MySpace page, you see something written about you that is simply untrue and a bit hurtful. Call your friend, explain the situation, and try to resolve the problem. I will play the part of your friend.</p>	<p>You made a doctor's appointment and, at the last minute, you have to cancel. Call the doctor's office, explain the situation and try to reschedule your appointment. I will play the role of the office receptionist.</p>
<p>You borrowed your friend's laptop/mp3 player/iPod/iPad/iPhone for the day. While this item was in your possession, it was stolen/damaged. Explain, in detail, what happened and offer a solution to repair/replace the item. I will play the part of your friend.</p>	<p>You missed a doctor's appointment and just received a \$50 charge in the mail. Call the office and talk to the accountant to get this charge eliminated. I will play the role of the office accountant.</p>

<p>You recently met with your doctor/accountant/lawyer/ other professional for some advice on a routine matter. When you receive the bill, it is extremely expensive and completely out of line with the service you received. Call the person's office, explain the situation, and try to resolve the problem. I will play the part of the office receptionist.</p>	<p>You lost your driver's license. Speak with someone at the licensing office, explain the situation, and try to get a new license. I will play the role of the license branch employee.</p>
<p>You are a player in your school/work sport team. You are going to miss an important game. Call the team captain and explain the situation. Offer some way to make up for not being there. I will play the part of the team captain.</p>	<p>Your bank card does not work in the automatic teller machine. Call the customer service number, explain the situation, and try to get the problem solved. I will play the part of the bank employee.</p>

SUPERIOR

- Can support opinions and hypothesize.
- Discuss concrete and abstract issues. Handle a linguistically unfamiliar situation.
- No patterns of errors
- Extended discourse

<p>Road Rage seems to have become a common occurrence in our society. More and more individuals are unloading their personal grievances and emotions in public places and turning innocent bystanders into victims of their personal issues. In your opinion, what are the causes of this phenomenon? What changes in our society are causing this loss of control and lack of concern and respect for others?</p>	<p>There has been much discussion recently about education reform. One topic on which even experts disagree is the manner in which an educator's professional performance should be assessed. Some argue that student performance, such as standardized test scores, should be used to evaluate teachers. Others say that given the disparities in our society, this is simply unfair. What, in your opinion, is the fairest and most accurate way to gauge an educator's success and effectiveness, and why?</p>
<p>Energy seems to be the major concern for the new millennium. The need to discover new energy resources and the drive to conserve and maximize the use of the existing ones is a priority for the United States. In your opinion, what have been the causes for the depletion of our resources and the impact that the energy crisis may have on our future as a nation?</p>	<p>From businesses to schools to entire cities, everyone seems to be "going green." I'd like you to discuss your views on the state of environmental awareness and action in our society today. Are we doing enough? Who bears the responsibility for doing more? And, given the industrialized nature of our world, do the actions of one individual really make a difference?</p>
<p>Reading as a social practice has changed through time. Before the arrival of television, this was a social practice used as entertainment. Later, reading was the best means of education. Today, with the arrival of technology, reading plays a different role in our society. In your opinion, what is the place and the importance of reading in contemporary life?</p>	<p>The problem of obesity is well documented in the United States. Alarming, this problem now affects an increasing number of children. What, in your opinion, are the factors contributing to the childhood obesity epidemic, who bears responsibility, and what should be done to address the problem on a societal level?</p>

<p>In today's world, music is more than simple entertainment. There are those who consider music a means to convey persuasive messages, especially to young people. Others believe that music is merely entertainment and does not significantly affect people in other ways. In your opinion, what are the roles that music plays in contemporary life, and what are the positive and negative effects that music can have on today's world?</p>	<p>In our modern society, work and professional activities take up an ever-increasing percentage of one's waking hours. People struggle to find time for personal and family activities, hobbies, and even fitness. In your opinion, how much responsibility does an employer bear for the health and happiness of its employees? And should employers be doing more to support their employees' work/life balance?</p>
<p>The Internet has drastically increased the frequency and speed of our day-to-day communication, affecting not only the quantity of communication, but also its quality, whether for better or worse. Please discuss the effect that connectivity to the Internet has had on human communication and the relationships that this communication fosters.</p>	<p>Given today's tough economic times, many schools and school systems face significant budget gaps. One strategy has been to cut programs in music/art/world language/sports. What is your reaction to the argument that these programs are not as important as "pure" academic subjects, such as language arts, science, and math? And what do we lose when schools focus almost exclusively on the "three R's"?</p>