G201-1

Current Trends in Foreign Language Assessment

Jeanne Rennie

In any educational field, there is a close relationship between assessment and instruction. In the current educational climate, policymakers and national organizations often initiate new trends in standards and assessment to bring about changes in instructional objectives and approaches at the classroom level. As these instructional objectives and approaches change, updated assessment practices are needed to reflect the changes. This interactive relationship between assessment and instruction, in which each influences the other, has characterized the foreign language field during the past decade.

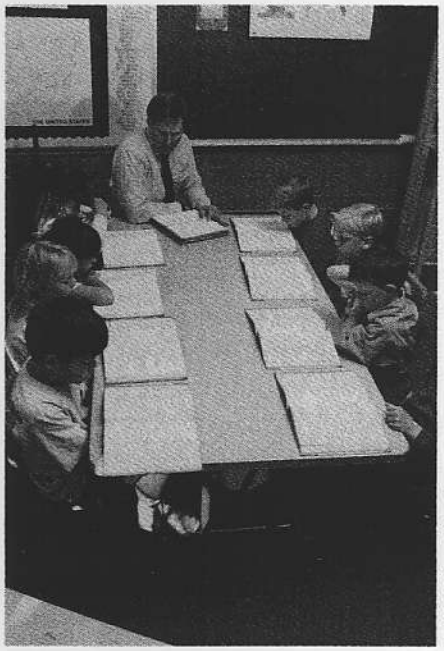
Since the early 1980s, the focus of foreign language instruction has moved away from the mastery of discrete language skills, such as grammar, vocabulary, and pronunciation, to the development of communicative proficiency—that is, the ability to communicate about real-world topics with native speakers of the target language. Widely termed the "proficiency movement," this change has developed in tandem with changes in how students' foreign language skills are assessed.

The traditional assessment tools of earlier decades—usually discrete-point tests that focused on individual skills, such as knowledge of vocabulary and grammatical accuracy—evaluated students' knowledge *about* the language, not what they could *do with* the language. Although discrete-point tests are still used in many circumstances, particularly for large-scale standardized assessments, many of the newer assessment measures and techniques are performance based; that is, they require students to demonstrate knowledge and skills by carrying out challenging tasks. This enables teachers to measure what the students can actually do in various communicative contexts using the target language.

Changes in foreign language assessment in recent years can be divided into two main categories based on their catalysts. National assessment initiatives have widely influenced classroom instruction in a "top-down" approach; local assessment initiatives, which have appeared in response to curricular and instructional changes, may be seen as "bottom-up" initiatives. Examples from each of these categories are discussed below.

An Influential National Initiative: The ACTFL *Proficiency Guidelines*

In the 1980s, the American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages (ACTFL), the Educational Testing Service (ETS), and the Interagency Language Roundtable (ILR) revised and adapted for use in academic settings a language proficiency rating scale and oral interview procedure that had been in use by federal government agencies since the 1950s. This technique was originally designed to measure how well individual foreign service officers would be able to carry out the specific language-related tasks they were likely to encounter in their overseas assignments (Clark and Clifford, 1988). The rating scale consisted of five levels of speaking performance that ranged from survival competence (Level 1) to native-like



proficiency (Level 5).[1] To assign an appropriate rating, a specially trained examiner would lead a carefully structured, face-to-face interview—the oral proficiency interview (OPI)—with the examinee (Clark and Clifford, 1988).

The collaboration among ACTFL, ETS, and ILR eventually led to the development of what are now known as the ACTFL *Proficiency Guidelines*[2] (American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages, 1986). The *Guidelines* define four main levels

---

Jeanne Rennie is Associate Director of the ERIC Clearinghouse on Languages and Linguistics at the Center for Applied Linguistics (CAL) in Washington, D.C. She is also Codirector of CAL's Foreign Language Education division and Editor for the Center for Research on Education, Diversity, and Excellence. She is a fluent speaker of French and can also communicate in Spanish.

0201-2

of proficiency: Novice, Intermediate, Advanced, and Superior. The first two levels each have subcategories of Low, Mid, and High, and the Advanced level includes Advanced and Advanced High, for a total of nine subcategories in the scale (see box for the characteristics of the four main levels).

According to the *Guidelines*, the Intermediate Low level is the first level of true proficiency—that is, the ability to use the language to express personal meaning. As such, this level has become an outcome goal set by policymakers in several states and an entrance requirement for many universities.

The ACTFL scale differs from the original federal government scale primarily in the subdivision of the two lowest levels (which correspond to Levels 0 and 1 on the government scale) and in the collapse of the government's three upper levels (3, 4, and 5) into a single level (Superior). These changes reflect the generally lower proficiency levels of secondary school and university students compared with those of government officials. In other words, because the proficiency of most students in academia is at the lower end of the scale, more subdivisions were needed at that end and fewer were needed at the upper end.

The *Guidelines* have been widely disseminated in the foreign language field, often in conjunction with training provided by ACTFL. In addition, ACTFL has trained hundreds of foreign language educators in the OPI procedure and is now offering modified OPI training to meet the needs of secondary school teachers. The Center for Applied Linguistics also uses the ACTFL scale in its work with the Simulated OPI (a tape-mediated speaking test rated using the ACTFL *Guidelines*), training workshops, and self-instructional rater training kits.

Although the ACTFL *Proficiency Guidelines* and the oral interview procedure have captured a great deal of attention since their development, they are not without their share of critics in the field. The *Guidelines* have been characterized as tautological; true by definition; lacking a theoretical basis; and not supported by research, particularly by the findings of second language acquisition research (Bachman, 1988; Lantolf and Frawley, 1985). Nevertheless, the *Guidelines* have been found to be a useful tool in foreign language education, and their influence is likely to continue. They are currently being revised by an ACTFL task force, which is scheduled to present revised *Guidelines* to the field at the end of 1998. A second task force is developing guidelines for use in grades K–12; these guidelines are also scheduled for presentation to the field in 1998.

The development of the *Guidelines* and the dissemination of the OPI have not eliminated the use of standardized tests in foreign language assessment. A number of national standardized language exams remain in use, primarily at the high school level for college-bound students. These include the SAT II tests for Chinese, French, German, Italian, Japanese, Latin, Modern Hebrew, and Spanish and the Advanced Placement tests in French, German, Latin, and Spanish.[3] A careful examination of these tests indicates some degree of influence from the proficiency movement.

Characteristics of Speaking Proficiency According to the ACTFL *Proficiency Guidelines*

Novice (Novice Low, Novice Mid, and Novice High): Speakers can communicate only in common, highly predictable daily situations using memorized and formulaic speech. They may be difficult to understand, even by those accustomed to interacting with nonnative speakers.

Intermediate (Intermediate Low, Intermediate Mid, and Intermediate High): Speakers can ask and answer simple questions and can maintain simple conversations on familiar topics using sentences and strings of sentences. They can usually be understood by those accustomed to nonnative speakers, although some repetition may be needed.

Advanced (Advanced and Advanced High): Speakers can converse fluently and discuss topics of personal and public interest. They can describe and narrate events in the past, present, and future using paragraph-like discourse. They can be understood without difficulty, even by those unaccustomed to nonnative speakers.

Superior: Speakers can participate effectively in most formal and informal conversations on practical, social, professional, and abstract topics. They can explain in detail, hypothesize, and support their opinions. At this level, errors virtually never interfere with communication.

—American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages, 1986

Local Initiatives: Alternative Assessments

As foreign language classroom practices have changed and the performance-based OPI has influenced instruction, a call for new approaches to classroom assessments is being heard. These approaches may be termed "alternative assessments" to distinguish them from more traditional standardized assessment techniques. Alternative assessments include techniques and procedures such as portfolios, demonstrations, journals, self-assessments, oral proficiency measures, and other measures of actual performance. These

0201-3

A Summary of Traditional and Alternative Assessment Methods

	Traditional Assessment	Alternative Assessment
Characteristics	■ Discrete points are assessed. ■ Students are assigned scores based on number or percentage correct. ■ Tests are scored easily and quickly. ■ Items are often multiple-choice, matching, or true/false. ■ Items test passive knowledge. (Students are merely required to recognize the correct answer, not to produce it.) ■ Assessments have typically been evaluated for statistical validity and reliability.	■ Emphasis is on the process of learning as well as the product. ■ Assessment tasks involve the application and integration of instructional content. Tasks are often open ended, offer students a wide range of choice and input, and culminate in individual or group performances. ■ Language is assessed holistically. Scoring requires judgment and use of scoring criteria (for example, rubrics). ■ Assessments often involve multistep production tasks or require multiple observations and thus require extended time to complete. ■ Tasks require students to demonstrate knowledge actively through problem solving, inferencing, and other complex cognitive skills. ■ Tasks are situation based or based in the real-world context. ■ Assessments often have not been evaluated for validity or reliability.
Use	■ To assess learning outcomes. ■ To allow comparisons across populations.	■ To assess: — learning outcomes. — learning processes. — instructional processes. — instructional objectives. ■ To encourage: — student involvement and ownership of assessment. — collaboration between students and teachers. ■ To plan effective instruction.
Common Formats	■ Multiple-choice response tests ■ Discrete-point tests	■ Portfolios ■ Journals ■ Demonstrations ■ Conferences ■ Observations

Based on information in Baker (1990); Herman, Aschbacher, and Winters (1992); and Lewis (1992).

0201-4

Preliminary Assessment Checklist

1. What are the instructional goals?
2. What is the purpose of this assessment?
3. What needs to be known about the students?
4. How will the results be used?
5. Does the process or instrument under consideration match the purpose for which students are being assessed? For example, will it help to determine progress in a particular lesson, mastery of a certain topic, or placement or exit eligibility? Will it be used to evaluate the effectiveness of the program?
6. Is the level or grade for which this process or instrument was developed appropriate for the students who are being assessed?
7. Does the process or instrument measure the language skills that need to be assessed (for example, speaking, listening, reading, or writing)?
8. Is the process or instrument designed for a program similar to the one in which the students are enrolled? If not, can it be adapted for use in the program?
9. If the process or instrument was not designed specifically for the language being assessed, can it be adapted easily?
10. Will the results of this assessment help in making the decisions that need to be made?

techniques typically encompass multiple skills, emphasize the processes as well as the products of learning, involve ongoing interaction between students and teachers, and engage students in planning for and interpreting the results of assessment.[4] Such alternative assessments integrate instruction and assessment in such a way that "teaching for the test" promotes good instruction, and good instructional practice is effectively evaluated by assessment outcomes. The table on page 29 summarizes the characteristics and uses of alternative and traditional assessment (which includes standardized tests) and lists common formats for each.

Alternative assessment techniques may be used to assess progress in any discipline and can be creatively adapted for use in foreign language education. For example, portfolios in a foreign language class may include audio- or videotapes demonstrating students' oral proficiency and listening comprehension in the target language. Students may also keep journals in which they can demonstrate their language skills by using the target language to record their learning activities and reflect on their progress.

At times, foreign language instructors may need to select an appropriate assessment instrument or process, keeping in mind the integration of instruction and assessment. A preliminary assessment checklist (adapted with permission from Thompson, 1997) can be used to help determine if a particular approach is worth considering in a particular instructional context (see box).

Conclusion

Top-down and bottom-up influences on foreign language assessment will undoubtedly continue. The publication of the national foreign language standards (National Standards in Foreign Language Education Project, 1996) means that attainment of these standards will need to be assessed. The best way to face the challenge of assessing attainment of these national goals may be by using alternative assessments that are developed in specific instructional contexts. However, educators must remember, as Genesee and Upshur (1996) stress, that there is "no right way" to assess second-language proficiency in a given context. Given the wide variation among foreign language students, teachers, courses, and contexts, an assessment tool or procedure that works well in one situation may be totally inappropriate in another. To evaluate students' progress and proficiency effectively, teachers need to learn about and gain competence in the use of a variety of assessment measures and procedures to discover what works best for them in each of the changing contexts in which they teach and with the full range of students in their classes.

References

American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages. 1986. *Proficiency Guidelines*. Yonkers, NY: Author.

Bachman, L. F. 1988. "Problems in Examining the Validity of the ACTFL Oral Proficiency Interview." *Studies in Second Language Acquisition* 10 (2): 149–164.

Baker, E. L. 1990. *What Probably Works in Alternative Assessment*. Los Angeles: National Center for Research and Evaluation, Standards, and Student Testing.

Clark, J. L. D., and R. T. Clifford. 1988. "The FSI/ILR/ACTFL Proficiency Scales and Testing Techniques: Development, Current Status, and Needed Research." *Studies in Second Language Acquisition* 10 (2): 129–147.

Genesee, F., and J. A. Upshur. 1996. *Classroom-Based Evaluation in Second Language Education*. Port Chester, NY: Cambridge University Press.

Herman, J. L., P. R. Aschbacher, and L. Winters. 1992. *A Practical Guide to Alternative Assessment*. Alexandria, VA: Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development.

Lantolf, J. P., and W. Frawley. 1985. "Oral-Proficiency Testing: A Critical Analysis." *The Modern Language Journal* 69 (4): 337–345.

Lewis, A. C. 1992. "No Shortcuts for Alternative Assessment." *Research and Development Review* 7 (4): n.p.

0201-5

National Standards in Foreign Language Education Project. 1996. *Standards for Foreign Language Learning: Preparing for the 21st Century*. Yonkers, NY: Author. ERIC Document Reproduction Service No. ED 394 279.

Rhodes, N. C., M. H. Rosenbusch, and L. Thompson. 1997. "Foreign Languages: Instruments, Techniques, and Standards." In G. D. Phye, ed., *Handbook of Classroom Assessment: Learning, Adjustment, and Achievement* 381–415. San Diego: Academic Press.

Thompson, L. 1997. *Foreign Language Assessment in Grades K–8: An Annotated Bibliography of Assessment Instruments*. McHenry, IL, and Washington, DC: Delta Systems and the Center for Applied Linguistics.

Notes

[1] Level 0 (no ability to communicate in the target language) was subsequently added to the scale.

[2] The ACTFL *Proficiency Guidelines* include guidelines for listening, reading, and writing as well as speaking.

[3] See Rhodes, Rosenbusch, and Thompson, 1997, for a brief description of these testing programs.

[4] See Genesee and Upshur, 1996, for a discussion of the use of alternative assessments.

Professional Development for Foreign Language Teachers

Joy Kreeft Peyton

Due to a rapidly changing student population, nationwide education reform, and the development of national standards in foreign language education, many new demands are being placed on foreign language teachers. Curtain and Pesola (1994) claim that foreign language teachers today "require a combination of competencies and background that may be unprecedented in the preparation of language teachers" (p. 241). Both they and Tedick and Walker (1996) list a number of factors that make the teaching of foreign languages especially challenging, and strong professional development critical.

- Second language teachers in all settings are working with student populations that are culturally, socioeconomically, linguistically, and academically diverse. Some of these students—heritage language students—speak the target language at home or have some familiarity with it; as a result, these students have very different proficiencies and needs than the monolingual English speakers that foreign language teachers are accustomed to working with (Campbell, 1996; Valdés, 1995).
- Students want to learn foreign languages for many different reasons, and they have many different ways of learning. Therefore, foreign language curricula and instruction must address a wide range of student goals and learning styles.
- The current emphasis on the exclusive use of the target language in the classroom requires teachers to have strong language skills.
- The emphasis on thematic learning requires teachers to be knowledgeable about and have a strong vocabulary in the thematic areas being explored; to be responsive to student interests in various topics; and to be able to work in teams with content-area teachers.
- The emphasis on collaborative learning and student self-directed learning requires teachers to be able to act as facilitators, guides, counselors, and resources in addition to serving as language experts.
- Teachers may be called upon to teach at more grade levels than they have in the past. For example, in July 1989, the North Carolina Board of Education approved a new certification standard that requires all foreign language teachers entering the profession to be certified in K–12, rather than in K–6 or 7–12 as had previously been the case (Curtain and Pesola, 1994).
- Teachers need to be able to use a variety of new technologies and need to know what technologies are available and how they can be used to support instruction.

What Teachers Need To Know

When foreign language teachers enter the profession, they need to have

Joy Kreeft Peyton is Director of the ERIC Clearinghouse on Languages and Linguistics at the Center for Applied Linguistics (CAL) in Washington, D.C. She is also Director of the National Clearinghouse for ESL Literacy Education and Vice President of CAL. She has had many articles published on instructional strategies for language learners and is a former teacher of Spanish. She speaks Spanish fluently.