

Oral Proficiency Learning Outcomes and Curricular Design

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Abstract: *In this article, the author describes the place of the oral proficiency guidelines as the only nationally recognized criteria for the assessment of communicative competence in speaking across languages and discusses learning outcomes studies based on the proficiency guidelines. The guidelines are now 20 years old, but learning outcomes are not significantly better than they were before the guidelines were published—suggesting that two decades of guideline-influenced instruction have failed to have an impact on student learning. However, data suggest that students need more hours of language exposure and instruction than a college curriculum can provide in order to attain advanced-level oral proficiency. Nonetheless, the guidelines are a curricular framework that helps teachers prepare students to break through to advanced level performance, even if this occurs after completing the college-level curriculum.*

Introduction

The ACTFL Proficiency Guidelines and the "proficiency movement" that followed are landmarks in the history of foreign language education in the United States. Although the ACTFL Proficiency Guidelines have been criticized on a variety of grounds (see Brindley, 1998; Liskin-Gasparro, 2000; Liskin-Gasparro, in this issue), they are nevertheless recognized by the United States government, many educational institutions (primary, secondary, postsecondary, and foreign language teacher certification programs), and many private sector firms as a reliable indicator of oral communication skills.

This broad acceptance is of critical importance in understanding the place of the proficiency guidelines, especially the guidelines for speaking (or oral proficiency guidelines), in American education today. For example, the government and educational and private sectors—recognizing oral proficiency ratings from an oral proficiency interview (OPI) on the ACTFL or Interagency Language Roundtable (ILR) scale as meaningful—hire, graduate, and promote individuals on the basis of these ratings. Moreover, ACTFL and Language Testing International (LTI) (ACTFL's testing agency) reported a 10% annual increase in oral proficiency testing for each of the past 14 years, with approximately one third of this growth coming from each of the three sectors: education, government, and business. This growth is evidence that those who use the results of the ACTFL OPI find these results meaningful as they hire and promote.

Thus, despite any theoretical reservations, the OPI and the proficiency guidelines for speaking on which the OPI is based have practical value in helping individuals and agencies distinguish among individuals with different language abilities. This implies that the construction of foreign language curricula in correlation with the proficiency guidelines also has practical value. Students expect to be trained in a way that will help them pass tests based on the proficiency guidelines so they can get a good job or a promotion. Instructors' success in the foreign language enterprise is based in part on students' success after they leave the foreign language classroom.

The proficiency guidelines remain at this time the only nationally recognized set of criteria for assessing oral communication skills across languages in the United States and the OPI (and tests derived from it, such as the SOPI [simulated oral proficiency interview], VOICI [video oral communication instrument], and so forth) is the only nationally recognized speaking test across

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