

The ACTFL Proficiency Guidelines: Gateway to Testing and Curriculum

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ABSTRACT The ACTFL Provisional Proficiency Guidelines, a series of proficiency levels for speaking, listening, reading, writing, and culture in a foreign language, are a guiding principle for the development of communicative, proficiency-oriented tests and curricula. Based on proficiency descriptions originally developed by the U.S. government, the guidelines at each level include statements of characteristic linguistic functions, content areas, and accuracy. The features of proficiency and achievement tests are discussed, and two proficiency-based curriculum projects are described.

Introduction

The ACTFL Provisional Proficiency Guidelines, developed with funding from the International Research and Studies Program of the U.S. Department of Education and published in 1982, consist of a series of descriptions of proficiency levels for speaking, listening, reading, writing, and culture in a foreign language. The set of guidelines introducing this issue includes language-general (generic) descriptions. The published guidelines also include language-specific guidelines for French, German, and Spanish. As of this writing, a second project is under way to develop similar proficiency descriptions for Chinese, Japanese, and Russian. The guidelines projects have been undertaken in

response to a recommendation of the President's Commission on Foreign Language and International Studies to establish "language proficiency achievement goals for the end of each year of study at all levels, with special attention to speaking proficiency."¹

The ACTFL Guidelines were written as a first and essential step in the development of articulated end-of-course goals. As the introduction to the guidelines states, they address a bipartite need for proficiency-based curriculum development and evaluation of both students and programs:

There is great potential for the impact of these guidelines on foreign language instruction. Measurable proficiency goals will form the basis for curriculum planning and classroom teaching. Students will more quickly develop a sense of accomplishment and will be able to refer to these "yardsticks" to measure their progress. The complex problem of articulation, the coordination of content (and skills) between grade and course levels, can also begin to be addressed. Student evaluation and placement can be based on actual language proficiency instead of on inaccurate and relatively uninformative measures of "seat time."²

The pages that follow describe the guidelines in greater detail and explore their application to two important areas of foreign language education—testing and curriculum development.

The Guidelines Revisited

As stated above, the guidelines are a sequential series of descriptions of the ability to speak, under-

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