Oral Proficiency Testing and the Language Curriculum: Two Experiments in Curricular Design for Conversation Courses

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ABSTRACT *This study examines the impact of the workshops in Oral Proficiency Testing organized by ACTFL and the Illinois Foreign Language Teachers Association (IFLTA). These workshops are designed to train college professors to administer oral interviews as a means of rating the level of oral proficiency of foreign language speakers. But the procedures of the interview and the criteria used by the rating scale have also served to reevaluate traditional curricula and to provide new ideas and guidelines for rethinking foreign language curricula so as to integrate the teaching of oral proficiency.*

Since the initial oral proficiency workshop in Houston (February, 1982), many American college teachers have been trained to administer the ACTFL/ETS oral interview as a means of rating the level of oral proficiency of foreign language speakers. In Illinois, the Illinois Foreign Language Teachers Association (IFLTA) arranged a series of workshops. This training may have a strong impact on the college curriculum. The procedures of the interview and the criteria which underpin the rating scale can serve to reevaluate traditional curricula and provide guidelines for the more effective integration of the teaching of oral proficiency in the foreign language classroom, be it language- or content-oriented. The two examples illustrate how courses in French conversation at the intermediate and advanced levels, taught as a direct result of these workshops, were affected.

For someone educated in France, *oral* is reminiscent of all the oral exams, at whatever level, for whatever degree, that one has to take after having successfully qualified by passing written exams. *L'oral* in France is not just a test assessing foreign language proficiency, it is a test in any subject: math, history, biology, or literature. In American classrooms, however, "test" almost invariably means written, and this is as true of language courses, English included, as of any other discipline. Consequently, when Oral Proficiency Assessment Workshops were announced in Illinois in 1982, they challenged the imagination and aroused a great deal of interest as well as post-workshop activities.[1]

These workshops are part of the Illinois Foreign Language Proficiency Project and were launched by IFLTA under the directorship of Professor Luz Berd of George Williams College in Downers Grove, IL. They are funded by a grant from the United States Office of Education's Undergraduate Foreign Language and International Studies Program. They are presented on the model of the ACTFL workshop in Oral Proficiency Assessment offered at Houston in February, 1982.[2] The purpose of these workshops is to train college professors in the oral proficiency assessment that has

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been developed by government agencies and adapted for academic use by ACTFL and ETS.[3]

In these workshops, teachers are introduced to the concept and history of the oral proficiency measurement system and receive intensive practice in applying it. They learn to administer the oral in-interview test through an intensive regimen of practical live interviews, and they learn to evaluate each candidate's oral proficiency.[4]

Participation in these workshops went well beyond the initial goals of learning how to administer oral interview tests and rate a candidate's speech production. The practice of interviewing and rating, once it had been thoroughly studied, cast a new light on language production by speakers of foreign languages, and it soon became apparent that the process of testing and the criteria used in the rating challenge traditional curricula and methodologies in foreign language instruction. The thrust of this training was immediately perceived by the members of the Northwestern University Department of French[5] as of primary importance for decisions concerning the general curriculum of the department. The Houston and Illinois workshops which we had attended had served to validate and substantiate some of our attempts to reorganize language instruction at the third- and fourth-year levels and presented a model which we tried to implement in two subsequent conversation courses. The teaching and applications of this curricular design proved to give immediate results and open perspectives for other courses.

I. The Oral Interview Procedure and the Curriculum

Three main issues emerged from the training and post-workshop evaluation.

1. The first issue to be addressed was an examination of traditional curricula in light of the rating criteria.

The originality of the oral interview test is that contrary to most tests used in foreign language instruction, it is not an achievement test. Foreign language speakers are evaluated on speaking ability rather than overt knowledge of the language, and the test measures the candidate's functional ability as it has been demonstrated in the course of an interview. The speech production of the candidate is then rated by being matched to a rating scale. The scale used in these workshops is known as the ACTFL scale. It is an elaboration of the scale used by the Government and known as the Government scale or the Interagency Language Roundtable (ILR) scale.[6] This scale is divided into hierarchically organized levels, ranging from 0 (no practical ability to function in the language) to 5 (ability equivalent to that of an educated native speaker), but each level is not a point on the scale; it is a range and is described extensively on the basis of a "Functional Trisection:"[7] The *Functional Trisection* covers a hierarchy of *functions, contexts,* and *accuracy* requirements for each level. For instance, a candidate whose proficiency would be rated at the Intermediate level would have to be able to describe and narrate in the present—typical *functions* of the Intermediate-level speaker. The candidate would also have to be able to talk about his father, his house, his university, or tell his daily schedule or leisure activities—*contexts* proving that he can narrate and describe in the present, all of this with a satisfactory degree of *accuracy.* Therefore, the rating of a candidate's speech production must be done globally, since rating at a particular level will be measured by the successful demonstration of ability to perform specific *functions,* in certain *contexts,* with varying degress of *accuracy.* Thus, someone who can function to some degree in Advanced-level contexts, but whose accuracy is only at the Intermediate level would be barred from the Advanced rating and be rated at the Intermediate level, or Intermediate-high, at most.[8]

This global measurement assumes, of course, that the levels follow a sequence. Mastery of one level in all parts entails, therefore, mastery of the lower levels, the corollary being that one should not expect any speaker to be able to operate consistently beyond his or her level. It has been established that those students who reach the finish line, the traditional B.A. in languages, generally rate as Advanced speakers, or sometimes Advanced-plus.[9] The profile of this level is that such a speaker is "able to fully participate in casual conversations, can express instruction, describe, report, and provide narration about current events, past and future activities" in the contexts of "concrete topics such as one's own background, family, interests, work, travel and current events."[10]

In traditional courses, however, students are constantly faced with having to perform linguistic tasks that require a higher level of oral proficiency than they possess. For instance, in a third-year course (e.g. Introduction to French Literature) a student will be confronted with questions such as:

—Is this character determined by his own individual make-up or by his social environment?

—Look at this poem. Do the images attain symbolic value?

—To what extent is so-and-so a romantic hero?

To answer such questions or even to discuss them, a speaker has to express an opinion, support it, and define and defend his position, all skills that only a speaker at levels three and four on the government scale or Superior level on the ACTFL scale could successfully undertake. Yet by passing directly from the first two years of instruction in a language to a content-oriented program, most language departments' curricula expect students to operate orally as if they had the skills of at least a Superior-level speaker on the ACTFL scale or level four on the Government scale, the most difficult and the least likely to be achieved in undergraduate years. The existing distinction between Introduction to French Literature and a topical course on French Classical Theater or Flaubert is not a linguistic one. The level of linguistic ability required for one is no less than for the other.

2. What guidelines do the rating criteria offer to organize an instructional curriculum that would be tailored to teaching oral proficiency?

Since for each level of oral proficiency rating there are certain linguistic tasks and certain tasks only, and since the levels are hierarchically organized, the linguistic tasks are proposed in a logical progression of difficulty. In adapting these criteria to the curriculum, we must ask ourselves therefore, not *what* should be taught, practical French versus literary criticism, or oral French versus literature, but instead, in what *order* the linguistic tasks expected from all material should be taught. It is, after all, possible to teach literature in a second- or third-year French course, just as well as teaching Civilization or Business French or Art History. All are linguistically equally difficult for an Intermediate-low or Intermediate-mid speaker.[11] They can be learned so long as the tasks asked of the speaker are:

a. realistically evaluated, and here reality means the level of competence of the student. Each level is what it is defined to mean in the rating scale.

b. progressively organized—the progression being that of the rating scale and implying gradual passage from one level to the next.[12]

Since each level is rated globally, the passage from one level to the next can only be achieved globally. Instruction, therefore, must be globally defined. The "Functional Trisection" (function, context, and accuracy) of the oral interview rating procedure offers a ready-made model for redesigning the curriculum for each level. The integration of all three components permits the concurrent development of fluency and accuracy. At the same time, for each level the scope and goals are limited, and since they are related to each other, they allow for intensive and comprehensive exposure. In turn, this integration provides for opportunities to internalize idioms, vocabulary, and appropriate morpho-syntactic structures.

3. The third question is one of practical application: what can be done to integrate oral proficiency into the existing curricula without sacrificing existing values and philosophies in language departments?

It would be unrealistic to think that uniformity in curriculum will ever be established, nor would this be desirable. It certainly seems to have been virtually impossible to standardize methodology; furthermore, research is not integrated or adopted in the same way at each institution, which has its unique set of problems and requirements. A solution sought in a curricular design that will be flexible enough to respect the ideological and actual nature of each program appears to be the only realistic course of action, all the more so since ideologies are often more difficult to change than the mechanics of course description and instruction. Moreover, aiming at functions alone, as is suggested by a notional/functional syllabus, is insufficient. While everyone agrees that learning a foreign language is learning to see correctly the right code in order to react to a specific situation, the problem remains that of selecting and ranking these situations unarbitrarily. It would be virtually impossible to cover all imaginable situations, apart from the fact that instruction would be limited to very mechanical processes. Whatever the functions of a notional/functional syllabus, they may be too specific to be of use in a general plan of learning, such as a liberal arts curriculum, or somehow irrelevant for the immediate needs of the learner only because they are too concretely or too narrowly defined.

In the "Functional Trisection," however, the functions characteristic of each level are of a general nature, such as description and narration in both the present and in the past for the Advanced level. They cover general topics and the context/content is also of a general nature; for instance, to describe in the present, a function characteristic of the Intermediate speaker, a candidate can be asked a variety of questions relating to personal experiences:

—Can you tell me about your house?

—What is your room like?
—You come from X...I don't know this city. Can you describe it for me?

Accuracy, because limited by and related to the functions, gains direct meaning and application. But if it is adapted to the various courses, the ability to give personal information could concern the speaker in a conversation class, or the hero in the discussion of a short story, or the representative of a socio-economic class in a civilization course, or all three activities in a purely language-oriented class, as long as the tasks asked of the speaker are limited to the ability levels as they are described in the "Functional Trisection." Moreover, describing one's father (level one competence on the Government scale, Intermediate on the ACTFL scale) and the main character of a play or novel are similar skills, which require linguistic ability as well as developed perception and organized expression. All are basic to the training expected in the humanities. All are basic also to the next stages and will be drawn on when attempting to support the opinion (level three on the Government scale, Superior on the ACTFL scale) that the central character of a play is a father figure of symbolic magnitude. Such basic and general functions call for linguistic skills as well as intellectual training without taxing the speakers beyond their competence or limiting their training to a single orientation. The general curricular design satisfies a liberal arts curriculum as well as a more professional orientation. It can also include a variety of activities: written or oral, performed separately or simultaneously.

II. Functional Trisection in the Intermediate Conversation Course: An Experiment.[13]

As an experiment that would test this design, a third-year French conversation course was used. It was taught immediately upon our returning from the December, 1982 IFLTA workshop. At the beginning of the course, each student was interviewed; each interview was rated using the ACTFL scale. Of 16 students, one placed at the Advanced level, two students at Novice-mid level, and all the others at either Intermediate-low or Intermediate-mid. It was decided to teach the course at the Intermediate level with occasional incursions into the Advanced level. The next course in the sequence would briefly review the functions and accuracy requirements of the Intermediate level and intensely concentrate on the Advanced level, with incursions into the Superior level, and so on. Through this "cyclical" pattern,[14] which had already been in the planning by the departmental policy committee, it was hoped that a progression in language acquisition would be obtained, which, in turn, would solve the problem of placement of students in Advanced courses.

The course syllabus was organized in the following fashion:

2 Weeks

FUNCTIONS	CONTEXT	ACCURACY
Describing in the present	Persons	Adjectives: place agreement
	Places: houses apartments cities	Adverbs: place quantity
	Objects	Partitive
	Unknown objects	

1 Week

Inquiring	Directions	Interrogative form and pronouns
	Personal life City life	

3 Weeks

Narrating in the present	Daily activities	Reflexive verb
	Professional life	Personal pronouns
	Stages of a journey	Joining sentences
	Stages of a task	Conjugating in the present

1 Week

Describing in the past	The way things were	Imperfect
	The way people were	
	What they used to do	
	Folklore tradition, costumes	

FUNCTIONS	CONTEXT	ACCURACY
1 Week		
Narrating in the past	What happened What I, he, we did An accident	*Passé Composé*
1 Week		
Describing and narrating in the past	A murder A catastrophe A film plot of a story Human interest stories	Imperfect and *Passé composé*

All in all the goals were modest; the time allotted to each unit was extensive and, in fact, repeated, since describing and narrating in the past require the same tools as describing and narrating in the present—adjectives, partitives, and adverbs; only the verbs cause new problems. Of course, all units were presented and developed actively, functionally, in a variety of ways. At the same time, a parallel program of listening comprehension was created relating to each unit, and students had several oral exams throughout the quarter. At the end of the course, during exam week, each student was tested again with an oral interview. The Advanced student had become Advanced-plus, one of the Novice-mids had left the course, while the other had remained a Novice-mid. All the other students were either Intermediate-high or Advanced. A modest achievement perhaps, yet the most interesting results of the final test were the parallel development of fluency and accuracy. The speech samples were good, easy to rate, and the development very consistent. As is expected at the Advanced level, the students still had an accent, could not remember if "commode" was masculine or feminine, but they could correctly give their age, they could conjugate verbs, make adjectives agree. Above all, they could speak in paragraphs with a great sense of ease and a good range of topics. If this was very important to the professor, it was a major breakthrough for most of the students.[15] Beyond linguistic improvement, they had also learned to describe in an organized fashion, to narrate intelligibly, respecting the sequence and importance of events and sustaining interest.

Training to develop each linguistic function proved to be not only a linguistic but also an intellectual endeavor. For instance, learning to describe in the present meant teaching an approach, insisting on the visual, the necessity for a progression, the search for the characteristic features. Learning to give directions included the need for precision, references, markers, logical sequencing. If the tripartite model of function/context/accuracy had provided the flexibility necessary for course implementation, it has also proved to be an indispensable tool to teach the basic intellectual and critical approach. Oral proficiency through this curriculum has earned its wide recognition and proven its intellectual value to liberal arts programs.

III. Integration of Oral Proficiency Guidelines into the Advanced Conversation Course: An Experiment[16]

The Intermediate conversation sequence is followed a year later by the advanced-level course. In the intervening quarters, the intermediate-cum-advanced student consolidates his position at the advanced level through grammar/composition, literature, and civilization courses. At this point, one can assume that the basic grammar has been acquired and needs only honing; the progressive skill-building which marked the intermediate level is no longer necessary, and the advanced conversation course maintains a global approach, as demonstrated below.

The seven students enrolled in this section were rated by testing during the first week of class as mostly Advanced, with one Intermediate-high and one Advanced-plus. Four students had lived or studied in a French-speaking country, four (not necessarily the same) planned to be traveling, studying, or working in France or Switzerland within a year, while only one neither had nor planned any travel experience (the Intermediate-high). The obvious level at which to teach seemed, therefore, to be Advanced-plus, with sallies into the Superior level. The significant functional competence of these speakers is the ability to proffer and support opinions and, in everyday tasks, to be able to get into, through, and out of situations with a complication. This was taken as the main pedagogical thrust of the course, along with the acquisition of a better grasp of sociolinguistic material and, to put it at its simplest, a more "natively French" expression (usual formulae, idioms, etc.).

The advanced course, since it does not need to spend a great deal of time progressively building

language skills and mastery of basics, points up the importance of context at this level. Juniors and seniors, whether or not they are French majors, have read extensively in French literature, history, sociology, and so on; they need much more intellectual nourishment and stimulation in a language class—be it composition or conversation, but especially the latter. At the same time, students who have taken a number of literature courses may have become quite adept at supporting opinions but have lost their control of "everyday" survival French. This was made clear in the student interviews done in 1982 after the Houston workshop and in the class described here.

Taking all these elements into account, a two-part course was designed. Part A (two hours a week) provided the intellectual context, in the guise of an introduction to Quebec through a text, Marcel Rioux's *Les Québécois* (Le temps qui court, 1980). Oral exposés with testing by the student *expositeur* and question-and-answer sessions on the material read each week, required the students to perform accurately the functions of narrating, describing, and explaining in the past and present (and to some extent in the future), and to communicate facts and explain points of view in detail. Controversial areas (language, politics in Quebec) required them to be able to support their opinions convincingly, explain them in detail, and also be able to refute others. All skills are described as pertaining to the Superior level. Whenever the discussion moved from the particular (Québec) to the general (e.g. the question of national identity), they gained further practice in opinion-supporting as well as the chance to hypothesize. The trisection appears thus:

FUNCTIONS	CONTEXT	ACCURACY
Narrating, describing, explaining in present and past (some future) with details Communicating facts and explaining points of view	Study of Quebec—history, geography, society, etc.	Grammar treated globally (correction as mistake occurs) Emphasis on sentence-building, subordinate clauses, conjunctions, etc.
Supporting and refuting opinions, explaining in detail	Controversial topics, e.g. language, politics	Means of expressing opinions, agreement, and disagreement, formally and informally
Hypothesizing	General discussion leading from particular case of Quebec.	Conditionals

Part B (called *le français pratique,* one hour a week) covered sociolinguistics and everyday situations. Within the general framework of traveling and living in France and Switzerland (of immediate concern to several students), the class practiced dealing with different social requirements in appropriate fashion (casual vs. formal expressions) and common situations, including some with complications (finding lost luggage, getting correct change, coping with a minor car accident, etc.). The correspondences are as follows:

FUNCTIONS	CONTEXT	ACCURACY
Introductions Invitations Requests for information	Transportation, travel agency, hotel, restaurant, car-rental,	Vocabulary (much of it concrete) *Formules de politesse* and questions
Giving information Getting service Insisting on a point of view.	Shopping, phone, job interview, housing, amusement	Good use of circumlocutions

Appropriate expression and aural accuracy were reinforced through a tailor-made listening comprehension program, composed of readings by a selection of Quebec poets and short topical excerpts from Radio Canada International.

The results of the course were quite satisfactory. Not only had the students considerably improved their proficiency (with the exception of the Intermediate-high, who is probably stuck there), but they themselves felt that they had and were pleased with their performance. They particularly enjoyed the *français pratique* session, and they did develop quite a large active practical vocabulary by the end of the quarter.

The Quebec part of the course, the "content" part, was somewhat less successful, because the choice of a text turned out to be a poor one. The subject matter itself was embraced with enthusiasm by all but one of the class, and they were all proud to

display their new-found knowledge and improved competence (aural as well as oral) at an end-of-term class visit to the Quebec Government's delegation in Chicago.

IV. Conclusions

In both courses, the subject matter ("Daily Life in Contemporary France" in the intermediate course, "Quebec and the *Québécois*" in the advanced) was the primary focus for the students, while for the professors it was secondary to the oral proficiency goals described above. In both cases, the module of the course is very general and adaptable to almost any content. As a literature course, for instance, oral proficiency could even be included as part of the instructional goal. Whether in history, in civilization, or in literature, it is possible to ask a student to observe and describe a literary character (or a historical one), his clothes, his appearance, his environment, his daily activities. It is possible to describe him in a given instance, in a specific situation, rather than to confront the students with the abstract question of his romanticism or other qualities. Yet, in a literary sense, describing a character, narrating his actions, are both stepping stones to the ability to answer that same question at a later stage of linguistic development. Whatever the content of the course or the level of linguistic ability, oral proficiency *can* be integrated and taught, even within the constraints of existing orientation.

At Northwestern University, in addition to the conversation courses at the third- and fourth-year level, we have begun to restructure the corresponding grammar and composition courses according to the same philosophy and approach. We plan to refine the research procedure by asking the students to take the oral interview with an interviewer who would not be their own instructor. The findings of the preliminary and post-instructional results would be more objective and more reliable. Yet, the positive responses of students and the quality of their progress are already an indication that these experiments met with an encouraging degree of success which prompts us to pursue our research and implementation along these lines.

NOTES

[1]The ideas expressed in this paper were originally presented by Isabelle Kaplan at the 1983 Central States Conference in St. Louis, MO.

[2]For details, see Reynaldo Jimenez and Carol J. Murphy, "Proficiency Projects in Action," in *Teaching for Proficiency, the Organizing Principle,* ed. Theodore V. Higgs, The ACTFL Foreign Language Education Series, No. 15 (Lincolnwood, IL: National Textbook Co., 1984), pp. 201-17.

[3]For details see Judith E. Liskin-Gasparro, "The ACTFL Proficiency Guidelines: A Historical Perspective," in *Teaching for Proficiency, the Organizing Principle,* ed. Theodore V. Higgs, The ACTFL Foreign Language Education Series, No. 15 (Lincolnwood, IL: National Textbook Co., 1984), pp. 11-42. She has prepared another relevant article on the subject for this volume.

[4]For details on the oral interview, see: Pardee Lowe, Jr. and Judith E. Liskin-Gasparro, "Testing Speaking Proficiency: The Oral Interview." Washington, DC: Center for Applied Linguistics, 1982 (available free of charge from CAL, and from ACTFL; 579 Broadway; Hastings-on-Hudson, NY 10706).

[5]Isabelle Kaplan participated in the Lake Geneva IFLTA workshop in December, 1982, and Margaret Sinclair in the Houston ACTFL workshop in February, 1982.

[6]See Alice C. Omaggio's "Methodology in Transition: The New Focus on Proficiency," *The Modern Language Journal,* 67 (1983), 340-41. See also Judith E. Liskin-Gasparro, *ETS Oral Proficiency Testing Manual.* (Princeton, NJ: Educational Testing Service, 1982), pp. i-iv. Academic rating scale and Government rating scale. The rating scale also appears elsewhere in this issue, p. 526.

[7]A. Omaggio, pp. 21-30. See also Judith E. Liskin-Gasparro, *ETS Oral Proficiency...,* pp. 21-30.

[8]J. Liskin-Gasparro, *ETS Oral Proficiency...,* pp. 16-17.

[9]John B. Carroll, "Foreign Language Proficiency Levels Attained by Language Majors near Graduation from College," *Foreign Language Annals,* 1 (1967), 131-51.

[10]See ACTFL scale in Omaggio, pp. 340-41; scale appears on p. 526 in this issue.

[11]See ACTFL scale, p. 526, in this issue.

[12]Omaggio, pp. 331-32.

[13]This course was taught by Isabelle Kaplan, Winter quarter, 1983.

[14]Albert Valdman, "The Incorporation of the Notion of Communicative Competence in the Design of the Introductory Foreign Language Course Syllabus," in *Proceedings of the National Conference on Professional Priorities,* ed. Dale E. Lange (Hastings-on-Hudson, NY: American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages, 1981), pp. 18-23.

[15]Some comments about the course published by the Course and Teacher Evaluation Committee were: "Great! I learned so much because I was not bored..." "Good in finding out our problems and working them out." "An excellent work plan..." "The whole class made great progress. Encourages you to learn..." "Course designed around the needs of the student..." "Effort was worth the trouble." "If you want to go to France, if you plan to take more French, if you just want to take a heck of a course, you must take this class..." "It is a lot of work, but my French improved an incredible amount."

[16]Margaret Sinclair taught the Advanced Conversation course in the Spring quarter, 1983. Different students were registered for this course.