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

*Isabelle M. Kaplan
Northwestern University
with Margaret Sinclair*

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

Isabelle M. Kaplan (C.A.P.E.S., University of Clermont-Ferrand) is a lecturer in French at Northwestern University; Evanston, IL. *Margaret Sinclair* (Ph.D., University of California, Berkeley) is presently a free-lance writer.

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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