

The ACTFL Proficiency Guidelines and the Oral Proficiency Interview: A Brief History and Analysis of Their Survival

Judith E. Liskin-Gasparro
University of Iowa

Abstract: *The ACTFL Proficiency Guidelines (ACTFL, 1982; 1986; Breiner-Sanders et al., 2000) and the Oral Proficiency Interview (OPI) derived from them have stimulated abundant and sustained professional engagement by foreign language teachers at all levels and in all languages, as well as intense and equally sustained criticism by specialists in foreign language testing. This paper presents (1) a brief history of the genesis of the Guidelines, (2) a summary of the criticisms leveled against them, and (3) an analysis of the reasons for the continued significance of the Guidelines in curricular and testing initiatives during the last two decades at both state and national levels.*

Introduction

The ACTFL Provisional Proficiency Guidelines (1982), the result of a collaboration between U.S. government testing agencies, the American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages (ACTFL), and the Educational Testing Service, brought to academic foreign language professionals a framework for understanding and measuring oral language ability that served as a catalyst for research, teaching, testing, and curriculum development projects. These projects emerged shortly after the provisional guidelines were published and the first workshops on oral proficiency interview testing were held. It is uncontroversial to state that today, just 20 years later, the terms *oral proficiency*, *OPI*, and *ACTFL Guidelines* are common currency in the discourse of foreign language teachers and preservice teacher candidates. Evidence of the impact of the proficiency guidelines can be seen at all levels and in all sectors of the foreign language teaching profession.

The creation of models of language proficiency, intended as the basis for theory building, test construction, and the design of instructional programs, is not a contemporary phenomenon, as attested by two recent historical studies of foreign language testing (Barnwell, 1996; Spolsky, 2000). In the recent past and in North America alone, our profession has produced models of proficiency at the rate of at least one or two per decade, including Oller's (1976) unitary competence proficiency model; Cummins's (1979) CALP/BICS model; Canale and Swain's (1980) communicative competence model; the ACTFL Proficiency Guidelines, first published in 1982 and then revised in 1986 and 1999; and Bachman's (1990) communicative language ability model (see Chalhoub-Deville, 1997, for brief descriptions). All of these models have sparked lively critical discussion.

Judith E. Liskin-Gasparro (PhD, University of Texas–Austin) is Associate Professor of Spanish at the University of Iowa, Iowa City, Iowa.