

Oral Proficiency Testing in the Real World: Answers to Frequently Asked Questions

Elvira Swender

American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages

Abstract: *The ACTFL Oral Proficiency Interview (OPI) is used to assess the ability of individuals to use language for real-world purposes. Today, OPIs are used by academic institutions, government agencies, and private corporations for many purposes: academic placement, student assessment, program evaluation, professional certification, hiring, and promotional qualification. Through Language Testing International (LTI), the exclusive ACTFL testing office, ACTFL conducts, rates, and archives 8,000 to 10,000 oral proficiency interviews each year. This article addresses questions that are frequently asked by educators, test takers, employers, certification boards, and others who require information about an individual's level of oral proficiency.*

The frequently asked questions (FAQs) addressed in this article are (1) Does taking an OPI over the phone produce a different rating than a face-to-face interview? (2) Are there differences in testing performance from one testing occasion to another when there is no significant opportunity for learning or forgetting between the two tests? (3) How proficient are today's foreign language undergraduate majors? (4) What minimum levels of proficiency are required in the workplace?

The answers to questions 1 and 2 are based on the results of an ACTFL-sponsored testing project that compared face-to-face with telephonic interviews. The findings indicated that there is no significant difference in the ratings assigned using face-to-face versus telephone test administration. The data from the same study indicated that comparable results are obtained in test/retest situations. Questions 3 and 4 are answered using data from the ACTFL Test Archives. The majority of undergraduate language majors have achieved proficiency levels that cluster around the Intermediate-High/Advanced-Low border. Different jobs require different levels of proficiency. Charts are provided to summarize the findings.

About the ACTFL OPI

The ACTFL Oral Proficiency Interview (OPI) is a valid and reliable testing method that measures how well a person speaks a language (see Dandonoli & Henning, 1991; Thompson, 1995; Surface & Dierdorff, in this volume). It is a face-to-face or telephonic interview between a certified ACTFL tester and an examinee.

On the surface, the interview is interactive and continuously adapts to the interests, experiences, and abilities of the speaker. Below the surface, the OPI follows a specific set of procedures to measure general spoken language by determining patterns of strengths and weaknesses. It establishes a speaker's level of consistent functional ability as well as the upper limits of that ability. Although the conversational format of each ACTFL OPI follows an established protocol, there is no script or prescribed set of questions.

The ACTFL OPI is a criterion-referenced test. It compares a sample of speech with the 10 proficiency levels outlined in the ACTFL Proficiency Guidelines—Speaking, Revised (Breiner-Sanders et al., 2000). The Guidelines describe language proficiency from Novice-Low (little or no functional ability in spoken language) to Superior (ability to function in formal and informal contexts, and to state and support opinions and hypotheses in extended discourse, with a high degree of accuracy). The 10 proficiency levels of the ACTFL rating scale are Superior, Advanced-

Elvira Swender (Doctor of Arts, Syracuse University) is the Director of Professional Programs at the American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages, Yonkers, New York.