

The ACTFL Guidelines: A Realistic View of Language that is Problematic for Assessment

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Ellis and Larsen-Freeman (2006) state that indices of language fluency and proficiency would be extremely valuable for researchers. Guidelines that provide benchmarks for development are useful for both inter-learner and intra-learner comparability. The ACTFL Proficiency Guidelines may be useful for their descriptive power and arguably realistic assumptions of language development. However, the nature of the guidelines' construct paradoxically limits its usefulness. The following commentary will describe my perspective of the ACTFL's view of language development and explain why the putative truths about language development and language use limit the utility of the scales.

A commendable but problematic feature of the guidelines is the shifting granularity of observation from Novice to Distinguished proficiency levels. At the lowest end of the learner spectrum, attention is given to discrete phonological, morphological, and lexical features. The attention shifts through progressively macroscopic observations at the sentence and discourse levels, to stylistic features of language. The development of topical knowledge, from concrete to abstract, is also implied in these observations. The guidelines' assumption that learners' proficiency is to be measured by shifting criteria as it develops, balancing observations of accuracy and fluency in the criteria, reflects a plausible understanding that acquisition of a language entails an increasingly complex construct of linguistic, social, and cognitive dimensions. However, this is also problematic. If one accepts this as true, then the qualitatively different levels of attainment cannot be compared in a quantitatively meaningful way. The ordinal nature of the ACTFL scales seems appropriate by downplaying quantitative comparison between proficiencies, because it recognizes that a change in proficiency is in fact a qualitative change in the interlanguage system. It is, arguably, a different interlanguage altogether.

The Guidelines' assumptions about the target language use (TLU) domain also impose constraints on the comparability of test-takers' performance. The ACTFL Proficiency Guidelines (2007) "describe language performance for adult language users regardless of where, when, or how the language is acquired." The guidelines' independence from a specific target language use (TLU) domain permits a wide range of applications for institutions, but again, at the cost of comparability. A two-year college may have very different criteria from a graduate program and from a community education program. For example, for the listening criteria, benchmarks for development are based upon the variety of topics, tasks, and contexts in which language is used. Results may show that learners are more proficient in some topics, tasks, or TLU appropriate linguistic structures than in others. From an intra-learner perspective, the criteria say very little about how generalizable that knowledge is to other domains.

Ultimately, the qualitative nature of the guidelines, while very descriptive, imposes constraints on the utility of the ACTFL as a multi-context assessment rating scale. Comparability of TLU domains must be empirically substantiated. This writer believes the guidelines hold an intuitive and appropriate view that language development is a shifting, kaleidoscopic entity. However, for this to be usefully operationalized in an assessment context, further specification and

validation are necessary.

REFERENCES

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