

An Evaluation of the ACTFL Proficiency Guidelines

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Reading through the ACTFL Proficiency Guidelines for the first time, one may think that the criteria used to measure proficiency in second language (L2) listening, speaking, reading, and writing seem to make a lot of sense. One could assume that from the Novice level through the Intermediate level, then to the Advanced level and beyond, a learner would begin to acquire a L2 by first learning isolated words, often starting with cognates or borrowed words similar to those from the first language (L1). After having acquired many isolated points, the learner would then start to connect these points together to form lines and make comprehensible sentences. After that, the learner would learn to consider cultural context and the pragmatic aspects of language use, expanding the existing dimensions of context-independent lines to form a multi-dimensional knowledge base, working toward becoming more native-like in using the L2.

After reading over the document the second time through the lens of second language acquisition (SLA) theories, however, I found a questionable point worthy of further investigation: the longitudinal sequence of learner performance presented in the guidelines shows support for a linear model of language acquisition. For example, in the speaking guidelines, a Novice level learner is characterized as having the “ability to communicate minimally” with frequent errors and “no autonomy of expression” (ACTFL, 1999, p. 5). At the Intermediate level, we see descriptions of learner performance, such as “utterance length increases slightly,” that includes better language forms that can be “understood by sympathetic interlocutors” (ACTFL, 1999, p. 4). The assumption used in the guidelines is that the length of utterances and writing products would increase and errors decrease as the learner moves up the ladder of L2 competence, but as Corder (1967) argues, a correct utterance, or sometimes multiple correct utterances, cannot be proof that a certain structure has been acquired. Many studies, such as Lightbown’s (1983) cross-sectional study on French learners acquiring the *-ing* form in English, suggest that when looking at the development of learner language, we cannot ignore certain phenomena, such as backsliding and restructuring, that make the language acquisition process a U-shaped model instead of the linear sequence presented in the guidelines.

I believe the major cause of this flawed view of learners’ interlanguage is the misleading portrayal of the role a L2 learner plays in his or her own L2 acquisition. The guidelines describe learners as passive receivers of knowledge instead of active agents who, with some but limited help, actively construct and reconstruct language hypotheses to form the dynamic system of developing L2 knowledge. For instance, in the speaking guidelines, a Novice learner is described as being able to “communicate minimally” (ACTFL, 1999, p. 5) while the Intermediate level learners are characterized by using language “primarily in a reactive mode” (ACTFL, 1999, p. 4). It is not until the Advanced level has been reached when the guidelines describe the learner as “participatory” (ACTFL, 1999, p. 3). Because learners may be seen as very passive recipients of linguistic input, the assumed model consequently resembles more of a cause and effect relationship where good quality input is expected to produce desirable results.

To address this issue, I suggest that instead of merely presenting general accounts of what a learner can do in each level in each category, the guidelines should provide specific, real-life

examples of the utterances, sentence structures, comprehension problems, and possible errors a learner would produce at each level to give readers a better idea of the strategies learners would use in producing second language at different proficiency levels. I am uncertain, however, about the feasibility of changing the guidelines from being product-driven, or merely describing an often stereotypical model learner, to being process-driven, taking account of research-based linguistic phenomena such as restructuring. Despite the potential difficulty of revision, I believe the effort would help the ACTFL Proficiency Guidelines give a more rounded and realistic representation of language proficiency, and be more helpful for language teachers and educators.

REFERENCES

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