

Reflections on the ACTFL Proficiency Guidelines

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One strength of the ACTFL Guidelines is that they have been formulated based on a functional approach to language, which views language as a channel to express functional meaning. It focuses on what a learner *can do* with the language, which can be assessed by examining the learner's performance in various contexts, and not on what the learner *knows* about the language. For instance, one criterion for the mid-intermediate listeners is the ability to comprehend short face-to-face conversations and routine telephone conversations pertaining to basic personal needs (ACTFL, 1985). This type of description suggests that curriculum planning should prioritize and place practical language use in focus, instead of being driven by some arbitrarily chosen linguistic structures that may lack a sense of immediacy to the students. Curriculum with a functional orientation can be motivating to many students because students can directly see the improvements by comparing the tasks they were able to perform before and after the teaching. From a teacher's perspective, I find these descriptive, open-ended guidelines (especially the ones for lower levels) helpful in providing benchmarks for my teaching, while allowing enough freedom for my own content selection. Given the fact that the labeling of class levels is often inconsistent across language programs, the guidelines provide a useful framework for an initial assessment of individual students, and can also inform teachers about what can realistically be expected from students. This in turn can help with the planning of lessons and the curriculum.

While the lower-level guidelines have been practical and helpful in rescaling my own expectations within my own classroom, the criteria for the Superior and Distinguished levels across the skill areas seem to be conflated with the literary and academic standards. On the one hand, at such high levels of language development, contextual knowledge of literary and other academic texts, and linguistic knowledge become intertwined. Yet, how do we explain the fact that many native speakers would fail by these measures? A linguistically competent person does not always have equally developed academic language. Does it mean then that those native speakers have failed learning their first language, in principal? This led me to ponder about the intention and assumptions made by the writers of the guidelines. Is this an attempt to move away from the long-term practice of using native speakers as the benchmark and avoid the comparative fallacy? Or is the assumption that all L2 learners study the language with academic pursuit in mind? Without a concrete answer, keeping these questions in mind can actually help us rethink and adapt the guidelines for our long-term planning and day-to-day teaching. It would not be beneficial to apply the guidelines wholesale; instead, they may better serve as a roadmap that shows milestones in the language learning process, and the extent to which learners' knowledge can grow. It can be a beginning point for assessment, program planning, and evaluation. The ultimate attainment of a learner, as well as the mode by which the learner gets to that point, cannot be generalized.

REFERENCES

American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages. (1985). *ACTFL proficiency*

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