

Utilizing the ACTFL Proficiency Guidelines for Level Placement

Emily Donbeck

Teachers College, Columbia University

It is extremely important for language learners to be placed in level-appropriate classrooms for second or foreign language instruction. In order to effectively do so, instructors must be able to refer to a framework that outlines the variegated levels of language development. The ACTFL Guidelines have attempted to provide such a framework by denoting four, and sometimes five, developmental stages—Novice, Intermediate, Advanced, Superior, and occasionally, Distinguished—for each language skill—listening, speaking, reading and writing. As a language learner becomes more advanced, more specific expectations are defined at each stage, which reflect the ultimate language goal: native-like production and utilization of the target language.

The guidelines are fairly comprehensive in that they do address the multiple skills and uses for language that a learner would hopefully gain, or at least be exposed to, throughout the acquisition process. The guidelines therefore serve as a sort of sequencing chart, mapping out the abilities and potential shortcomings of an archetypal learner at each stage. Language instructors, referring to detailed sequential landmarks in order to pinpoint a student's current level of acquisition or recent developmental progress, could benefit from such a resource. However, as most language instructors would probably agree, assessing students' language proficiency and being aware of proficiency levels for placement purposes can be a complex task, particularly when the instructor has a large group of students.

Knowing exactly where a student falls within the levels identified in the guidelines would require some in-depth observation and/or testing of each student's abilities. Although the ACTFL Guidelines depict various characteristics of each language learning level, they do not suggest a method for assessing where exactly a learner falls within these levels. While it is possible to read through the entire guidelines packet in order to predict the level of a particular language learner, such extensive reading to assess each member of a large second or foreign language class would take an enormous amount of time. Furthermore, leveling based purely on an instructor's subjective understanding of both the guidelines and the individual learner's language knowledge and abilities could yield fairly inaccurate results. In order to counteract the subjectivity of the ACTFL guidelines, some sort of more objective testing should be done to assess the students' language proficiency. The guidelines could then be used as a reference that intelligibly describes the test results to both the learner and the instructor.

As many instructors are aware, a single test is not always the most adequate way to assess a student's knowledge and/or skills; it is often the case that an instructor knows the abilities of his or her students better than a test could ever foretell. Regardless, with the amount of time that subjective assessment would take up, the possibility for inaccuracy in doing a subjective assessment, and the numerous other demands constantly being placed upon instructors of all kinds, teachers should be explicitly told that more objective counterparts to this assessment, such as the ACTFL's Oral Proficiency Interview and Writing Proficiency Test, should accompany the ACTFL Language Proficiency Guidelines.

Emily Donbeck is pursuing an MA in TESOL, with K-12 certification, at Teachers College, Columbia University. Her previous experience includes ESL instructor positions for AmeriCorps in Nashville, TN, and in Madrid, Spain. She has also taught middle school Language Arts in Gallatin, TN.