

Evaluating the ACTFL Proficiency Guidelines Speaking Section

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The current ACTFL Proficiency Guidelines provide interesting descriptions of expected proficiency by level within the four skill areas. The most measurable feature of proficiency consistently mentioned is the quantity of utterances or text comprehended. At times, characteristics of production are mentioned; however, the vagueness of the descriptors leaves the reader with more questions than answers. Overall, the guidelines most lack measurable features and descriptions of the quality of the skills involved. Qualities of speech such as grammatical complexity, prosody, lexical variety, accuracy, and fluency all seem like obvious choices to assess in a proficiency situation. The ACTFL Guidelines, however, mention these only sporadically and without concrete descriptions of how to gauge them. If these guidelines were to be used to actually place individual learners into levels, there are no quantifiable measures with which to do so. For the purposes of this commentary, the Speaking Guidelines will be analyzed.

Beginning with the Novice level of speaking proficiency, very little mention is made of pronunciation, prosody, or pragmatics. It is noted that the “speaker may have some difficulty producing even the simplest utterances” (ACTFL, 1999, p. 5). However, elaboration about the kind of difficulty is not discussed. In several levels, native-speaker interlocutors are referenced in terms of their ease or difficulty in understanding the non-native speaker. In all cases, the statements are vague and do not provide any measurable characteristics. For example, “Some Novice-Mid speakers will be understood only with great difficulty” (ACTFL, 1999, p. 5). Is this due to pronunciation issues, word choice, inappropriate grammatical forms, or something else entirely? The first mention of pronunciation is in the Novice-High level, and its reference is to interference from the first language (L1). Following is the descriptor “Errors are frequent” (ACTFL, 1999, p. 5) but the reader is left to guess what type of error it is referring to and why the errors cause a communication breakdown. Overall, the descriptors in the Novice level leave the reader with little information with which to concretely measure a speaker’s ability. Pronunciation, prosody, word choice, grammatical competence, and pragmatics are hardly mentioned, if at all; in other words, speaking ability is not adequately defined.

At the Intermediate level, the general description includes the following: “the ability to create with the language by combining and recombining learned elements, though primarily in the reactive mode” (ACTFL, 1999, p. 4). Characteristics about reactive mode will vary from learner to learner and are also dependent on the situation that the learner is faced with. Thus, the ACTFL Guidelines appear to be unsympathetic to individual differences. Similar to the Novice level, specifics regarding measurable features are missing. Vocabulary is first mentioned in this section and pronunciation is also discussed. Unfortunately, both descriptors provide little in terms of quantifiable qualities. The common proficiency feature of both vocabulary and pronunciation given is that the “speaker can generally be understood by sympathetic interlocutors” (ACTFL, 1999, p. 4). The most logical question that arises is how exactly one measures the comprehension of a sympathetic interlocutor. Needless to say, this is a vague statement, providing very little guidance.

At the Advanced and Superior levels vague and general statements continue to permeate: “under demands of Superior-level complex tasks, language may break down or prove inadequate” (ACTFL, 1999, p. 3). The reasons or characteristics of such language breakdowns are not given.

All in all, the Speaking Guidelines include vague descriptors with very little substance with which to assess proficiency. For those who will use the ACTFL Guidelines, concrete descriptors used to define level-specific speaking proficiency would be helpful. Features, such as grammatical complexity, pragmatic appropriateness, lexical variety, accuracy, and fluency can be used to delineate all levels, from Novice to Advanced. Without such measurable features, the ACTFL Guidelines are simply unclear depictions of ideas about proficiency.

REFERENCES

American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages. (1999). *Speaking guidelines revised*. Retrieved November 1, 2007, from <http://www.actfl.org/files/public/Guidelinespeak.pdf>

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