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ABSTRACT

A study investigated: (1) the average language proficiency level as determined by the American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages (ACTFL) Oral Proficiency Interview (OPI) attained by 271 college seniors majoring in 6 languages (Spanish, French, Russian, German, Japanese, Italian); (2) current and projected uses of the ACTFL OPI by college foreign language departments; and (3) implications for teaching, testing, and curriculum development. Data for the first question were obtained from a national survey of certified OPI testers. Results showed the average rating to be advanced (2 on the ACTFL rating scale). Data for the second research issue were taken from the same survey, and revealed that the most common uses for the OPI were as a departmental requirement or an option for undergraduate language majors. In addition, in some departments specific OPI ratings are required for undergraduates, graduate students, and teaching majors. Additional uses of the test were for teaching assistant training, setting curricular objectives, goal-setting for majors, ongoing progress assessment, departmental evaluation of instructional success, faculty research, training faculty to assess oral proficiency, and incorporation of test elements into instruction. Respondents felt demand for the OPI has increased in recent years. Over half had future plans for OPI use. In regard to the third issue, the results of this study indicated that departments can set realistic curricular goals for undergraduate and graduate majors, and state departments of education may develop oral proficiency requirements for teachers seeking certification in FLs. However, research documents the critical need for effective language teacher education that takes teachers' belief systems into consideration and ends confusion over what constitutes communicative language teaching. Recommendations for instructional development are offered. (MSE)

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TESTING THE LIMITS OF PROFICIENCY: THE ACTFL OPI AND FL DEPARTMENTS

BY

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Testing the Limits of Proficiency: The ACTFL OPI and FL Departments

This study explores both the present limits of proficiency as defined by the average rating attained by 271 senior majors in six languages on the ACTFL OPI, and the use of the OPI by FL departments. Although the ACTFL OPI has received its share of criticism (4; 18; 21) , its usefulness as a standard measurement of language proficiency cannot be ignored (14; 31; 32). Research by Dandonoli and Henning supports the use of the ACTFL Proficiency Guidelines as a foundation for the OPI and provides evidence of the test's reliability and validity.

In this study we examined the following research questions: 1) what is the average proficiency level attained by senior FL majors on the ACTFL OPI? 2) what are the current and projected uses of the ACTFL OPI by FL departments? and 3) what are the implications of this study on teaching, testing and curriculum development?

NEED FOR THE STUDY

Establishing the average proficiency level of the senior FL major is an essential starting point for understanding the current capabilities of senior FL majors and setting realistic curricular objectives and minimum proficiency levels. The present study also provides empirical data on the use of the ACTFL OPI in higher education. Stansfield and Kenyon have documented that about 2,000 OPI interviewers and raters were trained by ACTFL in the 1980s.

Although several studies have examined the proficiency levels of FL students (11; 16; 24), none has focused on a national study of the average proficiency level of senior FL majors. Valette underlines the

need for such a study of OPI ratings. She implies that today's FL senior majors would probably perform far worse on the OPI than those tested in Carroll's landmark study using the Foreign Service Interview to assess the oral proficiency of senior FL majors. However, Valette misinterpreted Carroll's results and incorrectly indicated that Carroll found the FSI rating of 2,500 seniors to be 2+ (Advanced High). In reality, Carroll gathered the FSI ratings of only 127 teachers (and an unspecified number of FL seniors) enrolled in NDEA Institutes, as a subsidiary study of his main research on the MLA Foreign Language Proficiency Tests for Teachers and Advanced Students scores of 2,523 FL senior majors.

The results of our study show that Valette also underestimated the capabilities of senior FL majors by guessing that their average proficiency rating on the ACTFL OPI would be Intermediate High (or 1+ on the FSI scale.) We found the mean and median ACTFL OPI ratings of 271 FL senior majors to be Advanced (or 2 on the FSI scale).

METHODOLOGY

To identify the average oral proficiency level of senior FL majors, we obtained a list of ACTFL certified OPI raters. After developing our survey instrument (see Appendix A), we mailed questionnaires on 21 May 1991 to the 303 certified ACTFL testers who are based in the United States. We focused on the responses of raters associated with FL departments at American colleges and universities, and analyzed only the results from language groups from whom we received a minimum of five responses. We received 103 surveys that met the above criteria, for a response rate of thirty-four percent. The distribution of responses by language of the tester, rank of tester, and

response rate by language appear in Table I. We sent questionnaires to raters in the following language groups in the quantities indicated: Spanish (eighty-six); French (ninety-nine); German (thirty-three); Japanese (fifty-five); Russian (eighteen); and Italian (twelve). As Table I shows, Spanish and Russian raters had the highest response rates. Four language coordinators and one graduate student who responded to our survey are included in the "instructor" category for lack of other information concerning their academic rank.

INSERT TABLE I ABOUT HERE

OPI RATINGS OF SENIOR FL MAJORS 1990-91

We asked the testers for information on the number of students they had tested, and the actual ratings they had given to senior FL majors on the ACTFL OPI in 1990-91. Some of the responses were unusable since the respondents had not kept records of their ratings or were unwilling to share them. In calculating the average rating, we eliminated from the data any information that appeared to be an estimate or guess. For example, some testers noted that they did not keep records of the college rank of the students; rather, they only knew which year of language study the students were in. To ensure the reliability of our results, we did not use any data whose accuracy we questioned. If the tester indicated that information concerning 1) student OPI ratings; 2) numbers of students who took the test; or 3) college rank of students was imprecise or an estimate, we did not use that data. Therefore, the usable sample consisted of thirty-three testers who provided ratings for 271 senior majors in six languages. The number of testers in each language, seniors who were rated, and

the average number of seniors tested by raters in each language group appear in Table II.

INSERT TABLE II ABOUT HERE

We used a weighted average to calculate the average rating of the senior FL majors. In Spanish, French, German, Russian, and Japanese, the mean and median ratings were Advanced. The weighted average rating of five senior majors in Italian was Intermediate High. We suspect that the sample size in Italian was too small to be truly representative. Table III presents the ratings of seniors in each language group.

INSERT TABLE III ABOUT HERE

OPIS ADMINISTERED IN 1990-91

To obtain data on the number of majors who were tested in 1990-91 with the ACTFL OPI, we asked respondents to indicate the number of freshmen, sophomores, juniors, seniors and graduate students that they had tested. In all, sixty-one testers provided this information. Table IV contains the numbers of students tested by language and college year of study. Spanish students made up the largest single group of students tested. The second largest group was Russian students, due to major summer testing initiatives which were undertaken by the American Association of Teachers of Russian and the Council for International Exchange of Scholars. French was third in number of students tested, followed by Japanese, German and Italian. The number of seniors tested by respondents is larger than the number of seniors for whom we have

OPI ratings, since several raters either did not maintain records of their ratings or chose not to share the ratings with us.

INSERT TABLE IV ABOUT HERE

OPI USE BY FL DEPARTMENTS

Approximately half of the respondents reported that their departments used the official ACTFL OPI. Pino asserts that most teachers use modified, (usually abbreviated) versions of the OPI rather than the official test, due to a lack of raters and time. Harlow and Caminero also state that modification of the OPI is rampant in oral testing practices in higher education. In addition, they found that eighty-seven percent of oral testing formats use the oral interview, and over half use role plays. Neither study provides data on the use of the official OPI in higher education.

Our study reveals that the FL departments of fifty-three respondents use the ACTFL OPI in a variety of ways. The most common uses are: 1) as a departmental requirement for undergraduate FL majors (twenty-three respondents); and 2) an option for undergraduate FL majors (twenty-two respondents.) Appendix B lists institutions that require the OPI for undergraduate majors or graduate students, as well as the rating that each requires. Respondents also reported that the following ratings were required for undergraduates, teaching majors, and graduate students in the quantities indicated in parentheses: Superior (two), Advanced (twelve), Intermediate High (nine), and Intermediate Mid (four).

Uses of the OPI (number of respondents)	
Requirement for undergraduate FL majors	23
Option for undergraduate FL majors	22
Option for undergraduate minors	13
Requirement for graduate students	11
Requirement for entry into School of Education	7
Option for graduate students	6
Requirement for undergraduate minors	6
Pre- and post-testing of students going abroad	6
Requirement for int'l business, prof. school, int'l studies	6

Table V shows the number and percentage of respondents whose departments use the OPI in at least one way.

INSERT TABLE V ABOUT HERE

The comments of the respondents provided insight into additional uses of the OPI: for TA training, setting curricular objectives, goal-setting for majors, ongoing progress assessment, student self-assessment of progress, departmental evaluation of the success of proficiency-oriented efforts, faculty research, training faculty to assess oral proficiency, and the incorporation of elements of the OPI test (situations and role play) into teaching. Training TAs in OPI testing and the ACTFL scale gives the TAs more realistic expectations of their students at each level.

Some testers acknowledged the value of the OPI in setting a speaking proficiency goal for majors, monitoring progress and providing feedback to students. Through the OPI, students assess their

own progress and departments can evaluate their success in teaching for proficiency. Some respondents considered these OPI applications to be more important than requiring students to attain a prescribed level in order to earn their degree. Several described using the test in their research projects, while others considered the OPI's assessment of students' overall proficiency to be an important advantage. A number of respondents discussed the impact of the OPI on departmental teaching and testing, and described how the faculty had incorporated many of its elements (e.g. situations) in language classes and tests.

The respondents also identified various disadvantages associated with departmental use of the OPI such as limited support of the ACTFL OPI, faculty resistance to oral testing, isolation of the tester within the department, the need to convince traditional departments of the OPI's usefulness, costs of training and recertification, dependence on grant money for training testers and administering the tests, fear of graduating majors with low proficiency levels, and lack of certified raters. One pointed out that those who are certified testers would like to use the OPI, while those that do not want to be (or cannot be) certified resist its use.

Due to the limited number of testers, the labor-intensive nature of the test, the cost of the OPI, as well as the cost of certification and re-certification, many institutions administer modified OPIs. Other respondents pointed out their own lack of interest in the OPI, or described their departments' disinterest in applying the test.

CHANGE IN DEMAND FOR THE OPI

Our study examined whether the testers believed that demand for the ACTFL OPI had increased, decreased, or remained the same over the

past few years. Harlow and Caminero have commented that no data exist as to whether oral testing has increased or decreased on large campuses over the years. However, our data supports their estimate that an increase has occurred. Many respondents (forty-three) indicated that demand had increased, although some observed only a slight increase. About a third replied that the demand had remained about the same, while ten percent cited a decrease. Table VI reports the respondents' beliefs about change in demand for the OPI by language group.

INSERT TABLE VI ABOUT HERE

FUTURE PLANS FOR USING THE OPI

Over half of the respondents (fifty-eight) had future plans for using the OPI , the most common of which were 1) to require the OPI as an exit exam for majors (twenty-seven); and 2) to train more testers in the OPI (twenty-seven). Only nine indicated that they had plans to use the OPI as an entrance exam into graduate school. In the "other" category (twenty-one), the respondents planned to use the OPI to: 1) test study abroad candidates before and after their experience (three); 2) test teacher education candidates prior to admission to the program (three); 3)place students in FL courses (three) ; and 4) expand use of the OPI to other languages, programs , or colleges within the system (four).

Others commented that they had no plans for future use of the OPI in their departments, that they were "light years away" from having any policy, that the department had no interest in the OPI, or that the very traditional department blocked the use of the OPI.

Only four respondents said that their institutions enter the OPI rating on the student transcript. Two said that they would like to enter OPI ratings on students' permanent records.

IMPLICATIONS FOR FOREIGN LANGUAGE EDUCATION

The results of this study establish the average proficiency level of 271 senior FL majors at Advanced. Based on this finding, FL departments can set realistic curricular goals for undergraduate and graduate majors, and state departments of education may develop oral proficiency requirements for teachers seeking certification in FLs. Curriculum developers at the elementary and secondary levels also gain an understanding of the oral proficiency level most FL majors will attain in college.

The study also reveals the uses of the OPI by FL departments. According to Byrnes, one of the major curricular implications of the proficiency movement is accountability. Our study indicates that a number of undergraduate FL programs have begun to use the ACTFL OPI for a variety of purposes including testing, placement, program exit, study abroad, curricular goals, and research. In contrast, few graduate programs require the OPI for entry or exit. This situation is curious since graduate students presumably need higher levels of oral proficiency for graduate studies and TA assignments than undergraduate majors.

The proficiency level of today's senior FL majors raises questions about the outcome of ten years of the proficiency movement, and twenty years of focus on building communicative competence. The Carroll study established the average proficiency level of 127 FL teachers at 2+ on the FSI (equivalent to Advanced High on the OPI).

Although differences in the tests, scales, rating systems and populations in the Carroll and present studies prohibit a conclusive comparison of the two average proficiency levels, the two studies represent historic levels of proficiency attained over a thirty year period.

What factors within FL education help to define the limits of oral language development in the FL classroom, as measured by the OPI ? What effect do classroom practices, curriculum, and teacher training have on the development of proficiency? Other studies such as Grosse and Feyten, and Cummins have examined the impact of the proficiency movement on foreign language education. Evidence in the literature suggests that the FL curriculum, teaching methods, and teacher education pose constraints on the classroom development of oral language proficiency. Indeed, research by Benseler and Schulz shows that different methods do not necessarily produce significantly different results in adult second language acquisition. With the limited number of FLES programs in existence and an ongoing need for improved articulation among K-12 and college faculty (1), hopes for early language development of significant numbers of future FL majors are dim. Among the external factors affecting oral language development in the classroom are target language use in the classroom, proficiency level of teachers, instructional materials, and teacher belief system and preparation.

Acknowledging classroom input and output in the target language as critical to oral language development (19; 20; 34), Duff and Polio's research provides data on the rather limited use of the target

language in university FL classrooms. They found a range of ten to one hundred percent use of the FL in a sample of twenty-six hours of class.

In a recent study of priorities in foreign language education (3), teacher educators identified the proficiency level of FL teachers as a major concern. Based on the results of the present study we assume that the national average proficiency level of non-native FL teachers is Advanced or Advanced High. Unfortunately, the development of student proficiency beyond that of the teacher appears unlikely without extensive student contact with native speakers or authentic materials. Kalivoda describes how teachers frequently request courses to develop their own proficiency, only to be denied such courses by FL departments who prefer to offer literature courses.

Research documents the critical need for more effective language teacher education that takes teachers' belief systems into consideration (12; 27) and ends confusion over what constitutes communicative language teaching. Cummins points out in her study of school/college articulation and proficiency standards that many teachers do not understand the meaning of teaching for communication, and want guidance in how to implement proficiency-oriented teaching methods and curricular goals and proficiency testing. Studies by Nunan, Nerenz, and Rogers reveal that teachers actually spend little time in class on communication, even when they think that they are doing so. Interaction is limited, as the teacher dominates the input, structures the opportunities for output, and allows students little time for creative language use. Teacher educators around the country (3) describe a widespread lack of supervising teachers for student interns who actually apply the principles of communicative

language teaching covered in the methods course. TAs also need good teaching models to help develop their own teaching skills. Examples of excellent classroom FL teaching on videotape would be an invaluable resource for teacher education. In ACTFL's Dreams, Nightmares and Realities, state FL supervisors describe the dire lack of training for in-service and pre-service teachers in their states.

Instructional materials which emphasize discrete point grammatical mastery through structured drills outnumber authentic materials which teach language in culturally and linguistically rich contexts. Although Valette contends that today's "proficiency-oriented" classes are less successful than yesterday's classrooms where grammatical accuracy received the attention it deserves, considerable evidence supports the theory that many FL classrooms still emphasize grammatical mastery rather than communication. For many FL classrooms, the "proficiency orientation" is *de jure* rather than *de facto*! For example, Walz' analyses of French texts on the college level (36; 37) show that most emphasize grammatical practice rather than communication. According to Walz , "almost twenty years after the profession began discussing communicative competence, very few textbooks have enough activities to allow communication to dominate class time. One reason is the time in class/space in textbooks that drills take up" (p. 165).

EXPANDING THE LIMITS OF PROFICIENCY

To break out of the limits of proficiency attained in the classroom by the average senior FL major in this study, we recommend: 1) reaching beyond the traditional classroom to allow the students more interaction with authentic texts and native speakers; and 2) providing

teachers more opportunities to develop language proficiency and communicative language teaching beliefs and skills. Specifically we recommend

* frequent use of authentic materials in language classes
*abundant interaction between FL students and native speakers from the community or ESL programs
* extensive opportunities for creative use of language by students in and out of class
* content-based instruction in the FL at K-adult levels (23)
*the development of communicative language teacher training programs for K-university faculty and TAs
*development of teacher training videotapes that show excellent communicative language classes that promote student-centered learning
* better articulation of elementary, secondary and adult FL programs through Academic Alliances
* scholarships for study abroad programs for students and teachers.

Leaver describes promising ways to "dismantle classroom walls" in a Russian program for the Foreign Service Institute that includes extensive opportunities for interaction with native speakers for real communicative purposes, content-based instruction, telephone conversations with native speakers, and expeditions outside the classroom. The results of her efforts are measured by the Level 3 on the FSI ILR scale attained by eighty percent of the student body in her program. Her innovative and creative approaches can be applied by open-minded FL teachers at any level in any instructional setting.

Energy and the belief that the approaches will work are prerequisites to their success!

From our analysis we conclude that the profession can continue to expect Advanced levels of proficiency from FL senior majors until we narrow the gap between language teaching theory and practice, improve the quality of teacher education for K through university faculty, fund study abroad opportunities, and break out of the limits imposed by traditional classroom walls and materials.

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APPENDIX A

SURVEY INSTRUMENT: THE OPI IN THE FL DEPARTMENT

Please complete the questions below. Your participation in this study of the OPI is very important and we appreciate your assistance. Your response is confidential.

The OPI of this questionnaire refers exclusively to the ACTFL Oral Proficiency Interview.

1. Is your certification as an ACTFL Oral Proficiency tester current?

_____ Yes _____ No

2. In what language(s) are you certified?

_____ Arabic	_____ ESL	_____ French
_____ German	_____ Hebrew	_____ Hindi
_____ Italian	_____ Japanese	_____ Mandarin
_____ Portuguese	_____ Russian	_____ Spanish

3. Are you affiliated with a college or university?

_____ Yes _____ No

If yes, please provide the following information:

Your Rank:

Department:

University:

4. Is the ACTFL OPI currently being used in your department?

_____ Yes _____ No

If yes, how is the OPI used? Please check all that apply.

_____ departmental requirement for undergraduate majors

_____ departmental option for undergraduate majors

_____ departmental requirement for undergraduate minors

_____ departmental option for undergraduate minors

_____ departmental requirement for graduate students

_____ departmental option for graduate students

_____ other (e.g. option for international business major)

_____

5. Does the department require a certain score on the OPI?

_____ Yes _____ No What score is that? _____

6. Are OPI results entered on the student's permanent academic record (college transcript)? _____ Yes _____ No

7. Approximately how many OPIs did you administer in academic year 1990-91 to:

freshmen_____ sophomores _____ juniors _____ seniors _____ graduate students _____

8. In order to assess the national average OPI rating of foreign language majors near graduation (seniors), please indicate the number of senior majors that you tested in academic year 1990-91 who achieved the ratings below.

Language of OPI _____

ACTFL	For. Lang. Interagency Roundtable
_____ Superior	(____3, ___ 3+, ___ 4, ___ 4+)
_____ Advanced High	(____2+)
_____ Advanced	(____2)
_____ Intermediate-High	(____1+)
_____ Intermediate-Mid	(____1)
_____ Intermediate-Low	
_____Novice-High	(____0+)
_____Novice-Mid	(___ 0)

_____Novice-Low

9. In what year did you become certified as an ACTFL tester? 19___

10. In your experience over the past few years, has demand for the OPI generally increased or decreased?

_____ increased _____ decreased _____ remained the same

11. What future plans does your department have regarding the OPI?

_____ to require the OPI as an exit exam for majors

_____ to require the OPI as an entrance exam for graduate students

_____ to train more testers in the OPI

_____ other (please specify) _____

Target date for implementation of above plans _____

Comments:

Would you like a copy of the results of the study?

_____ Yes _____ No

Name and address where the results should be sent:

Thank you very much for your cooperation. Please return the questionnnaire by July 12, 1991 to :

APPENDIX B

INSTITUTIONS THAT REQUIRE THE OPI

Institution	Rater's Language	Req. for UG Major	Req. Rating	Req. for Graduate	Req. Rating
Boston C.	French		Yes	Adv	
Brigham Young U	French	Dept/Teaching	No		
Colorado-Boulder	Italian	Yes	No		
Colorado-Denver	French	Yes	Adv		
Florida	French	Yes			
George Washington	Russian	Yes	2	Yes	2
Georgetown-For Ser (Adv)	Spanish	Yes	Fair (IH)	Yes	
Indiana U of Penn.	Spanish	Education	Adv		
Lewis & Clark C.	German	Yes	No		
Michigan	Russian		Yes	No	
Monterey Institute	Russian	Yes	No		
Yes	No				
Northeast Louisiana	Spanish	Yes	Adv		
Northern Colorada	Spanish	Yes	Adv		
Pennsylvania-Lauder Superior	Japanese			Yes	
Portland State entrance	Russian	entrance req.	1		

Samford	Spanish	Yes	No	
Shippensburg	Spanish	Yes	No	
Southern U	French	Yes	No	
SUNY-Cortland	French	Yes	No	
Syracuse	Spanish		Yes	Int Hi
Tennessee-Knoxville	French	Yes	Yes	Superior
Virginia Tech	Spanish	Yes	Adv	
Weber State	Span/French	Education	IH	
Wisconsin-Madison	German	Education	IH	

TABLE I

Respondents from US Colleges and Universities

	Instr.	Asst. Prof.	Assoc. Prof.	Prof.	Total # of Respondents	% Rate of Response
Spanish	11	7	13	6	37	0.43
French	5	6	14	4	31	0.31
Russian	2	2	2	1	8	0.44
German	2	2	3	4	11	0.23
Japanese	4	5	2		11	0.20
Italian	1	1	2	1	5	0.42
TOTAL	26	23	36	16	103	0.34

TABLE II

Number of Raters and Seniors Rated

	# of Testers	# of Srs w/ Ratings	Average # Tested
Spanish	13	125	10
French	10	66	7
Russian	3	38	13
German	4	22	6
Japanese	2	15	8
Italian	1	5	5
TOTAL	33	271	

TABLE III

OPI Ratings of Senior FL Majors 1990-91

Number of Seniors Whose Ratings Were Provided						
		Span.	Fren.	Russ.	Germ.	Japa.	Ital.
1	Superior	8	7	5	4	3	
2	Adv Hi	17	8	10	2	3	
3	Advanced	47	28	16	8	5	1
4	Int. High	36	20	7	6	4	3
5	Int. Mid	14	3		2		1
6	Int. Low	3					
TOTAL # SR:		125	66	38	22	15	5
Wtd Av Rating		3.32	3.06	2.66	3.0	2.67	4.0
Rating		Adv.	Adv.	Adv.	Adv.	Adv.	Int. Hi
Std Dev		1.12	1.02	0.94	1.23	1.11	0.71

TABLE IV

Number of OPIs Administered in 1990-91

	Fresh	Sophs	Jrs	Srs	Grads	Total
Spanish	74	125	95	180	77	551
French	59	32	30	66	36	223
Russian	42	50	131	58	45	326
German	16	18	10	27	27	98
Japanese	23	75	35	26	35	194
Italian				5		5
TOTAL	214	300	301	362	220	1397

TABLE V

Number & Percent of Respondents Whose Departments Use OPI

	# of Respondents to Survey	# of Respondents Whose Depts Use OPI	% Respondents Whose Depts Use OPI
Spanish	37	18	49%
French	31	20	65%
German	11	7	64%
Japanese	11	2	18%
Russian	8	5	63%
Italian	5	1	20%
TOTAL	103	53	51%

TABLE VI

Change in Demand for OPI

	Number of respondents who believe demand for OPI has		
	Increased	Decreased	Remained Same
Spanish	17	2	13
French	12	6	11
Russian	3		4
German	4	3	3
Japanese	7		2
Italian			2
TOTAL	43	11	35