

# Creating an Assessment Library

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**T**he Consortium for Assessing Performance Standards is a New Jersey Grant Project that created a database of thematically organized, integrated performance assessment tasks at the benchmark levels of proficiency, novice-mid, intermediate-low and pre-advanced as defined by the ACTFL Performance Guidelines for K-12 Learners. The assessment tasks are available to world language teachers in the state of New Jersey and nationwide to measure achievement of the New Jersey Core Curriculum Content Standards for World Languages or the national Standards for Foreign Language Learning in the 21st Century.

## Background

In 1996, the New Jersey Department of Education adopted Core Curriculum Content Standards in seven academic areas. Standards 7.1 (Communication) and 7.2 (Culture) mandated K-12 world languages programs in all districts and targeted the 2001 school year for assessment of 4th, 8th and 11th graders' attainment of those standards. For the next several years, there was a flurry of excitement and activity in the field as districts worked to expand their existing language programs to include elementary and middle school students. Districts focused on hiring qualified teachers, training those teachers in second language acquisition theory, proficiency-based strategies and writing curriculum. The state released grant monies to run institutes in the northern, central, and southern parts of the state. The Foreign Language Educators of New Jersey (FLENJ) collaborated with the New Jersey Department of Education (NJDOE) to offer professional development opportunities that support standards-based teaching. Additionally, the NJDOE sanctioned emergency certifications and universities established graduate programs targeting educators new to the field.

As the state testing program unfolded, it became clear that the NJDOE would not be able to assess all content areas. When a curricular area is not assessed, in the minds of many administrators it is not as important. When cuts become necessary, it is the areas that are not assessed that are the first to go. So with budget failures, the introduction of No Child Left Behind legislation and the absence of a



ACTFL	American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages
CAPS	Consortium for Assessing Performance Standards
CARLA	Center for Advanced Research on Language Acquisition
FLAP	Foreign Language Assistance Program
FLENJ	Foreign Language Educators of New Jersey
IPA	Integrated Performance Assessment
SOPA	Student Oral Performance Assessment
TOA	Thematically Organized Assessment

state test, districts began to limit or eliminate elementary foreign language programs. The bright future of world languages in the state began to dim.

In this atmosphere a group of New Jersey supervisors formed a consortium that received a Foreign Language Assistance Program (FLAP) grant to train teachers to develop performance-based assessments in the three modes of communication in order to assess the state standards. Any district can use these benchmark assessments to ascertain the pro-

iciency level of students in their programs and to validate the efficacy of curriculum and instruction. They assess what learners can do with the language they are acquiring, rather than only what they know about its form and function.

## Are Students Achieving the Standards?

There were three major questions we sought to answer with our work. First, what should students know and be able to do? To answer this question we looked to the Standards for Foreign Language Learning in the 21st Century (American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages, 1999) and the New Jersey Core Curriculum Content Standards for World Languages (New Jersey Department of Education, 2004). Second, how well should students be expected to perform the standards? The ACTFL Performance Guidelines for K-12 Learners (ACTFL, 1998) guided the answer this question. This article addresses our third question: How do we know that our students are achieving the standards?

"I teach so my students will spiral up the ladder of proficiency. I explain to them what it takes to get to that next level." - CAPS Teacher

Our grant project had several goals:

- To provide research-based, high quality staff development to all world languages teachers in the consortium districts
- To develop a database of thematically organized, integrated performance assessment tasks at the benchmark levels of proficiency at novice-mid, intermediate-low and pre-advanced as defined by the ACTFL Performance Guidelines for K-12 Learners (ACTFL, 1998)
- To use the performance assessment tasks as a program evaluation tool to measure attainment of the New Jersey Core Curriculum Content Standards for World Languages and the National Standards for Foreign Language Learning
- To disseminate assessment tasks to world language teachers in the State of New Jersey and nationwide to measure achievement of the New Jersey Core Curriculum Content Standards for World Languages (New Jersey Department of Education, 2004) or the national Standards for Foreign Language Learning in the 21st Century (ACTFL, 1999)
- To provide a design template for the development of benchmark assessments that can be utilized by school districts nationwide

## What are Thematically Organized Assessments?

Thematically Organized Assessments (TOAs) are performance-based assessment tasks that target a certain proficiency level and assess the learner's ability to communicate across three modes of communication: interpretive (listening or reading); interpersonal (speaking/listening interaction or reading/writing interaction); and presentational (speaking or writing). Each TOA will contain one task for each of the

three modes of communication.

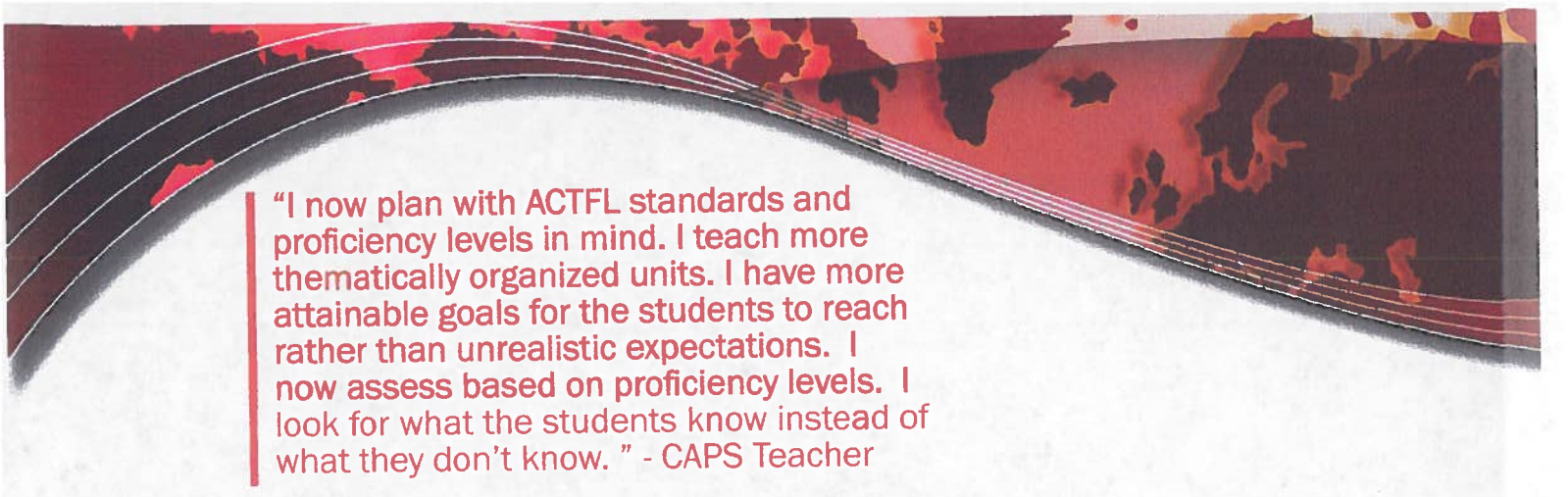
Like all performance-based assessments, TOAs measure what the learner can do with the language he has been learning, rather than emphasizing what he knows about it. The TOA concept draws its inspiration from Integrated Performance Assessments (IPAs) that were created by the American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages (ACTFL, n.d.).

All good performance-based assessment tasks, including TOAs, center around simulations of real-life tasks. These types of tasks:

1. capture student interest due to their relevance to the real world
2. show the student that he is learning language that "matters"
3. engender student commitment to complete the tasks in a worthy manner because they lead to language functionality in real-life ways

One of the first things teachers will see in the TOAs is the great attention paid to creating tasks that "matter" in developing an ability to use language in daily, real-world ways. Likewise, we have made every effort to ensure that support materials for the various tasks of the TOAs are themselves authentic documents. To capture their interest and commitment, students listen to audio texts that native speakers of the language might hear and read passages that would be common to the everyday reading habits of native speakers. While the text is authentic, specific tasks of the TOAs are tailored to the language proficiency target. When students show their interpersonal and presentational speaking skills, they simulate functions in real-life that would require these abilities.

Thematically Organized Assessments are intended to assess student language ability at benchmark "moments" along the language learning continuum (for example, at the end of elementary, middle or high school) or at the end of units of instruction. There are thematically organized assessments developed in a variety of languages; French, German, Italian and Spanish. Even though the task is language specific, teachers can adapt tasks for their own languages, by finding an appropriate text for the interpretive task and making the necessary modifications.



**"I now plan with ACTFL standards and proficiency levels in mind. I teach more thematically organized units. I have more attainable goals for the students to reach rather than unrealistic expectations. I now assess based on proficiency levels. I look for what the students know instead of what they don't know." - CAPS Teacher**

## How Did We Develop These Assessments?

These assessment tasks called "Thematically Organized Assessments" are the product of the Consortium for Assessing Performance Standards (CAPS), comprised of four New Jersey public school districts; East Brunswick, Edison, West Orange and West Windsor-Plainsboro.

Foreign language supervisors in each of the four districts selected approximately 40 elementary, middle and high school foreign language teachers to be trained and then to develop these tasks. We began development in 2003 and completed in spring, 2006. This group of teachers, along with their supervisors, participated in a three-year process that involved training, development, field-testing and final editing of the TOAs.

### Training

To begin the process, teachers and supervisors participated in a three-day training session. The purpose of this training was to ensure that all participants understood the concept of proficiency and how to assess for proficiency. The Center for Applied Linguistics trained the elementary teachers on the use of the Student Oral Performance Assessment (SOPA). The middle and high school teachers focused on the Oral Proficiency Interview-Modified (for Novice and Intermediate speakers) with trainers from the American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages (ACTFL). Subsequent to this training all participants learned about the design of performance-based assessment tasks and rubric development. Training sessions were comprehensive and spanned an entire academic year. (For further information on assessment see the Center for Advanced Research on Language Acquisition (CARLA) virtual assessment center, information on page 24.

### Development

Following training, teachers participated in a development process that included oversight and guidance by district supervisors as well as outside consultants responsible for training and development. An intense vetting, or professional review process was used throughout multiple iterations of the TOAs as they made their way through the development pipeline. This process involved the outside consultant, supervisors and teachers working collaboratively to review all the tasks developed.

### Field-Testing

Participant teachers field-tested the tasks with their own students to determine how well they worked and to ascertain ways to improve the TOAs. Their colleagues were encouraged to field test the TOAs with their students, adding another layer of feedback and information to the development process. After field-testing their tasks, teachers shared samples of student work with colleagues and received feedback on the TOAs and their implementation.

### Final Editing

Finally, supervisors from the four New Jersey districts, along with project consultants, reviewed, edited and modified the TOAs to make them available in an easily usable format for foreign language teachers outside the project.

## Why assess this way?

Language learning today focuses on teaching learners how to use language to communicate effectively in real world situations. Standards for Foreign Language Learning in the 21st Century (ACTFL, 1999) calls for students to be communicatively competent—to be able to use language for meaningful purposes. In matters of diplomacy, economy and security, the United States needs a citizenry that is communicative in languages in addition to English. And students enroll in language courses because they, too, would like to become effective users of different languages. Foreign language teachers all across the U.S. are striving to rethink, redesign and retool to teach in a way that will create citizens that can use languages in this way.

As foreign language classroom instruction has shifted its focus from knowledge of grammar rules to students being able to use language in meaningful, real world contexts, the emphasis of foreign language assessment has also shifted. For assessment to be authentic, and thus fair to the student, it must measure what students have learned to do and in the manner they learned it. If students spend their class time in learning how to "do" foreign language, assessment must measure the same thing. TOAs measure student second language ability that mirrors how and what they learned in the instructional setting.

## How Could You Use the Thematically Organized Assessments?

Teachers who wish to become acquainted with the concept of performance-based assessment and teachers proficient in their use will find well-developed tasks to incorporate into the classroom experience. Foreign language teachers might use TOAs for a number of different reasons:

- To get acquainted with performance-based assessment by looking at a number of carefully crafted example tasks;
- To gain greater understanding of the characteristics of well-constructed rubrics
- To experiment with performance-based assessment by using a few of the TOAs
- To incorporate TOAs into an assessment program for the classroom
- To use TOAs as targeted performances at the end of thematic units of instruction when using the backward design concept (Wiggins and McTighe, 2005)

In the K-12 language learning continuum, where would the TOAs be used — elementary, middle or high school?

While the TOAs were created with a certain age learner in mind, they are far more characteristic of proficiency levels than chronological ages or even cognitive development. Each TOA was designed to measure performance that would be characteristic of learners who evidence a specific proficiency ability. The three levels for which tasks were developed and benchmarked are:

- Novice-Mid
- Intermediate-Low
- Pre-Advanced (Intermediate-High)

Although these assessments were developed with a learner age-range in mind, they target a certain proficiency level.

They can be adapted for learners anywhere along the K-12 school continuum. For example, both an elementary student and a 10th grader who had not had significant foreign language learning experience prior to high school would most appropriately be assessed using TOAs for the Novice-Mid range of proficiency. Intermediate-Low assessments can be used with 7th or 8th grade middle school students who have completed an elementary school foreign language program and a high school junior or senior who began foreign language studies in high school. Pre-Advanced tasks assume a long, uninterrupted sequence of language learning and would be appropriate for high school juniors or seniors who began study in elementary school.

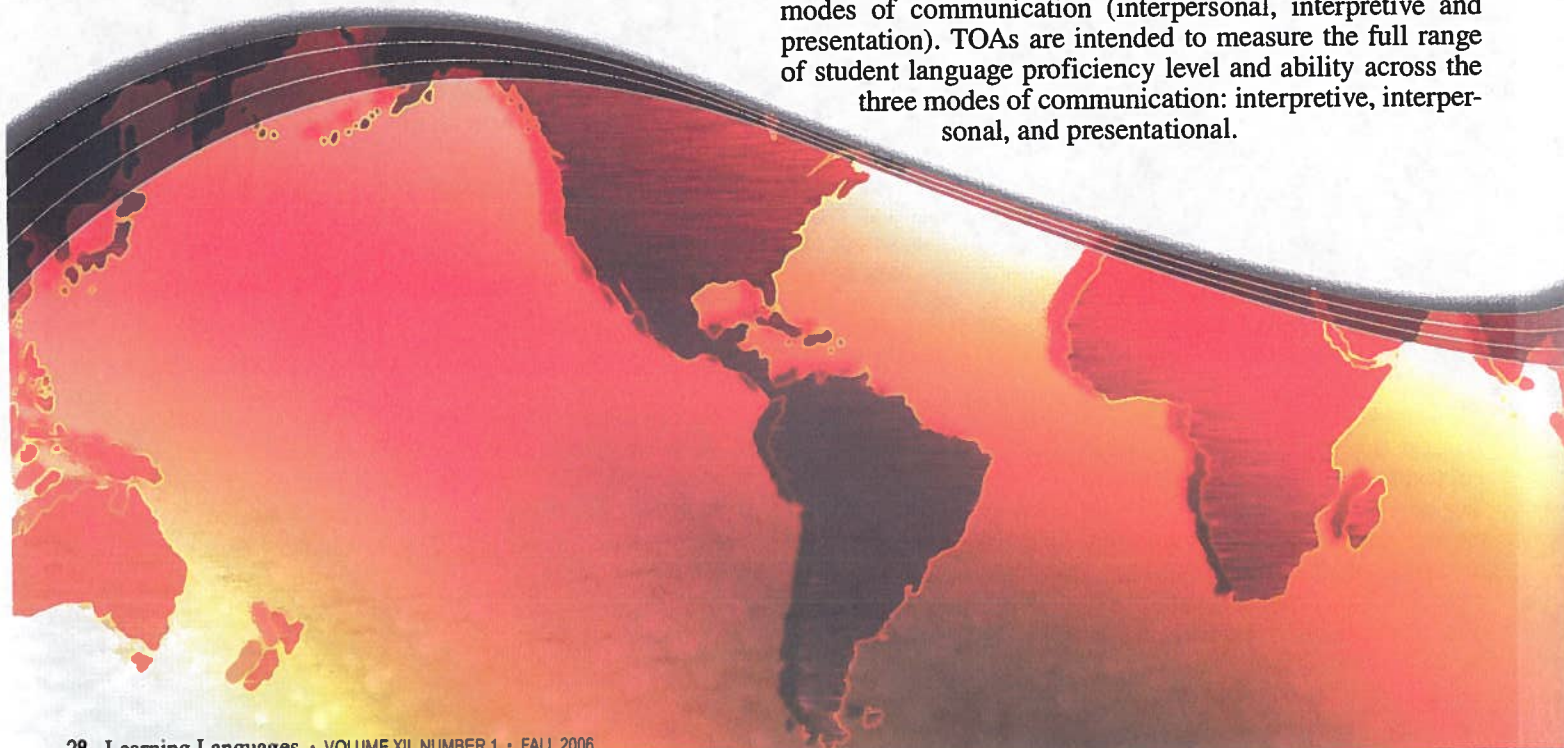
## What are the content/theme areas of the TOAs?

All of the Thematically Organized Assessments center on a pre-identified theme. Many of these themes are familiar to language teachers and language learners.

- Art Appreciation
- Art of Well-Being
- Celebrations and Traditions
- Discovering the World Around Me
- Entertainment
- Environment
- How do I spend my free time?
- Legends and Folktales
- Lifestyles
- Relationships
- Work and Career

## What does a TOA actually look like?

Each TOA is anchored to a proficiency target (Novice-Mid, Intermediate-Low or Pre-Advanced), a theme and the three modes of communication (interpersonal, interpretive and presentation). TOAs are intended to measure the full range of student language proficiency level and ability across the three modes of communication: interpretive, interpersonal, and presentational.



The first page of a TOA provides the following information:

- Title of the TOA
- Theme of the TOA
- Targeted proficiency level
- An overview of the three assessment tasks for the TOA

Once past the opening page of the TOA, the reader finds the three different assessment tasks: first, interpretive, second, interpersonal and last, presentational. Each task follows a standard template that includes the following components:

- Task Title
- Theme
- Level (Novice-Mid, Intermediate-Low, Pre-Advanced)
- National Standards Goals
- Communicative Mode
- Time Frame (time needed to complete the task)
- Description of the Task (always stated in student-friendly language for direct classroom use)
- Materials Needed
- Teacher Notes (any information that would be helpful for the using teacher to have in advance)
- Adaptations (This section is for teachers to note any changes that could be made to meet varying learner needs, such as gifted and talented and special education.)



This standard template of information summarizes the important elements of the assessment task. Following this page are any support materials that are required to implement the task, Internet links with pertinent information and any activity sheets that might be required for the task. Last is the rubric for evaluating the student's performance for the particular task. Many of the rubrics found in the TOAs are tailor-made for the specific tasks; others may be generic ru-

brics developed by project teachers to measure interpretive, interpersonal and presentational tasks across the three targeted proficiency levels of Novice-Mid, Intermediate-Low and Pre-Advanced.

What has the impact of this project been on our curriculum, instruction and assessment practices?

As a result of the intensive work with our teachers over the three years of this grant project, we have seen a transformation in the way the participants talk about and teach world languages. Although all of the supervisors and teachers were familiar with the standards, create assessments that measure communication has influenced how we go about our daily work. Each district is rewriting curriculum documents to more fully reflect the standards. In several of the districts, the mid-term and final exams are now modeled after the TOAs. Perhaps the biggest change has been in how each teacher is approaching their daily planning and instruction. Teachers report that they are much more sensitive to the proficiency level of the activities they use. They feel they are better able to challenge students to move up the proficiency scale and to take advantage of the "teachable moment" to help students improve.

How can I access the assessment tasks and rubrics?

Go the [www.flenj.org](http://www.flenj.org) and click on "Consortium for Assessing Performance Standards." On this web site you will be able to access the 70 assessment tasks developed, rubrics and samples of student work for some of the tasks. We hope you find our work as valuable as we have found our project to be for our students and teachers.

## References

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