

Assessing Your Students' Oral English Proficiency

Using Oral Proficiency Interviews

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Oral Proficiency Interview

- An individual, casual, spoken interview conducted to determine what level of speaking (and listening) proficiency a student has.

Evaluation Scales

- Students are evaluated according to a standardized scale, not on a curve.
- There are two widely used standardized scales:
 - FSI (Foreign Service Institute)
 - ACTFL/ETS (American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages/ Educational Testing Service)

The FSI Scale

- The FSI scale runs from 0 to 5, and covers the range from no ability whatsoever in the language to native-speaker.
- Don't expect your students to make great strides from level to level in just one semester/year.

The ACTFL/ETS Scale

- The ACTFL/ETS scale runs from zero to native, and has eleven levels
 - Zero
 - Three novice [low, mid, high]
 - Three intermediate [low, mid, high]
 - Three advanced (advanced, adv. Plus, and superior)
 - Native
- It is more appropriate for lower-level learners and more sensitive to their progress

Basic OPI Procedure

- The OPI appears to be a casual interview
- It is actually carefully structured to lead candidates into different topics and communicative tasks and check their ability to perform different types of linguistic tasks
- Each interview generally lasts from two to five minutes (shorter for students at lower levels; longer for students at higher levels)
- Each interview progresses through four phases.

OPI Phases

1. **Warm-up** (simple greetings, asking the student's name, etc.)
2. **Initial level check** (approximate)
3. **Probing and pushing** (trying to push the student beyond the initially determined level and gauging success; the evaluator pushes until the students' language breaks down)
4. **Wind down and conclusion** (thanks, farewell)

Questions of Various Types

1. **Yes/No** ("Are you from here?" "Do you like baseball?")
2. **Choice (alternative)** ("Do you like baseball, or basketball?")
3. **Information (wh-)** ("What is your favorite sport" "Why?")
4. **Role-reversal (Candidate interviews evaluator)** ("Let's change places for a minute, and you ask me some questions.")

Questions of Various Types

5. **Questions using props** ("What is this?")
6. **Polite requests** ("Tell me about your favorite sport.")
7. **Hypothetical questions** ("How might your life be different if you lived in the USA?")
8. **Supported opinion questions** ("What is your opinion on legalized gambling?")
9. **Descriptive preludes** ("Much has been spoken about the recent election...")

Video Examples

- **What OPI score would you give each of these students?**
 - Sandra
 - Silvia
 - Armandina
 - Ricardo
 - Lucia
 - Javier
 - Nina

Video Examples

- **What OPI score would you give each of these students?**
 - Sandra
 - Silvia
 - Armandina
 - Ricardo
 - Lucia
 - Javier
 - Nina

Practical Considerations

- **Quiet room**
- **No interruptions**
- **Recording equipment (audio cassette)?**
- **Time to interview all your students**

OPI's (Oral Proficiency Interviews)

Basic Idea

A casual, spoken, individual interview conducted by an examiner to determine what level of speaking (and listening) proficiency a candidate for foreign language instruction has. Candidates are evaluated according to a standardized scale; not on a curve.

Evaluation Scales

Two different rating scales are widely used. The government FSI (U. S. Foreign Service Institute) scale goes from level 0 (no functional ability in the language) to 5 (educated native speaker proficiency). The ACTFL/ETS (American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages/Educational Testing Service) scale covers a similar range from 0 to 5, but it expands the number of sub-ranges within each level at the lower end of the scale. FSI level 0 is called "Novice" on the ACTFL/ETS scale, level 1 is "Intermediate," and level 2 is "Advanced." Levels 3-4 (rarely achieved by U.S. students in foreign language classes) are combined and labeled "Superior." Level 5 is "Native." A more detailed explanation of each of these levels and sublevels follows:

FSI	ACTFL/ETS	Description
	Zero	No ability whatsoever in the language
	Novice—Low	Unable to function in the spoken language (knows isolated words and phrases; no functional communicative ability)
0	Novice—Mid	Able to operate in only a very limited capacity within very predictable areas of need (using only stock phrases learned in a language course or some other way; cannot use these expressions spontaneously or combine known elements in new ways)
0+	Novice—High	Able to satisfy immediate needs with learned utterances (relies heavily on learned utterances, rather than personalized, situationally adapted ones; even sympathetic conversation partners have difficulty understanding a speaker at this level)
	Intermediate—Low (aka "Survival" or "Tourist" level)	Able to satisfy basic survival needs and minimum courtesy requirements (can create with language [combining known elements to say new things not learned by rote], ask and answer questions on familiar topics, and handle straightforward communicative tasks in limited survival or social contexts [ordering a meal in a restaurant, asking for directions and information on the street, making purchase, inviting a friend to a party—as long as there are no complications or unexpected difficulties] as long as the conversation partner is linguistically sympathetic)
1	Intermediate—Mid	Able to satisfy some survival needs and some limited social demands (can converse on familiar topics such as personal history and leisure time; frequent, long pauses interrupt speech while speaker struggles to find the right words or create the right language forms; pronunciation is strongly influenced by first language)
1+	Intermediate—High	Able to satisfy most survival needs and limited social demands (can carry on uncomplicated, general conversations, but errors are evident and vocabulary is limited; may need to repeat utterances in order to make self understood)
2	Advanced	Able to satisfy routine social demands and limited work requirements (can participate fully in conversations on a variety of personal and social topics; can describe and narrate in past, present, and future times; can give explanations and instructions; can accomplish a variety of communicative tasks, including those with complications or unforeseen difficulties; can talk in connected paragraphs about a variety of topics; talk best about concrete topics; experience some difficulty talking about abstract concepts; can be understood by native speakers who are not used to dealing with non-native speakers)
2+	Advanced Plus	Able to satisfy most work requirements and show some ability to communicate on concrete topics (can support opinions, hypothesize, and explain in detail when talking about topics in special fields of competence; compensates for imperfect grasp of the language with paraphrasing and circumlocution; can communicate fine shades of meaning; under demands of superior-level, complex tasks, language breaks down or proves inadequate).
3, 3+, 4, 4+	Superior	Able to speak the language with sufficient structural accuracy and vocabulary to participate effectively in most formal and informal conversations (can engage in extended discourse on a variety of practical, social, and professional topics [but not every conceivable topic]; can support their opinions on abstract or controversial topics, can deal with new and unfamiliar linguistic situations; rarely miscommunicate; demonstrate error patterns only with difficult, low-frequency structures and these errors do not impede communication; may still hesitate when speaking or use general instead of technical vocabulary) Note: Many young, uneducated native speakers cannot operate at this level)
5	Native	Able to speak like an educated native speaker

Basic OPI Procedure

While an OPI gives the appearance of a casual interview, it is actually carefully structured to lead the candidate into different topics and communicative contexts and check his/her ability to perform different types of linguistic tasks.

The evaluator should listen for the candidate's accuracy and fluency. Both of these characteristics are important and need to be properly balanced in the final evaluation.

The interview generally lasts from two to five minutes. Interviews with candidates at very low levels of proficiency may be even shorter. When a candidate is at a higher level of proficiency, the interview may require more time in order to check and probe the candidate's abilities in various contexts and with different linguistic tasks.

The interview normally progresses through four phases:

1. Warm up (simple greetings, asking the candidate's name, etc.)
2. Initial level check (the evaluator privately determines an approximate level for the candidate)
3. Probing and pushing (the evaluator tries to push the candidate beyond the initially determined level and gauges the candidate's success; if the candidate is successful, the evaluator pushes on to the next level until the candidate reaches the point where his/her language breaks down)
4. Wind down and conclusion (thanks, farewell)

Questions asked in an interview may be of various types:

1. Yes/No questions ("Are you from here? Do you like baseball?")
2. Choice (alternative) questions ("Do you like baseball or basketball?")
3. Information (wh-) questions ("What is your favorite sport? Why?")
4. Role-reversal: candidate interviews evaluator ("Let's change places for a minute and you ask me some questions.")
5. Questions using props ("What is this?" [evaluator points to table, book, etc.])
6. Polite requests ("Tell me about your favorite sport." "Can you tell me how to get to your house from here?")
7. Hypothetical questions ("How might your life be different if you lived in the United States?")
8. Supported opinion questions ("What is your opinion on legalized gambling?")
9. Descriptive preludes ("Much has been spoken and written about the recent election. Some people think it was fair; others disagree. What do you think?")

Practical Considerations

- Quiet room
- No interruptions (need a monitor/administrator outside)
- Recording equipment???
- Mental preparation (beware of prejudices, stress, etc.)
- Preliminary information sheet (to be filled out by each candidate prior to the interview)
- Don't reveal the placement level at the end (there may be a subsequent need to change it)

English Conversation Rubric—Initial Presentation

PhD English Course, Tongji University
Ray Harrison, BYU China Teaching Program, 2005-2006

	Does Not Meet Expectations Points = 1	Almost Meets Expectations Points = 2	Meets Expectations Points = 3	Exceeds Expectations Points = 4
Fluency (x2)	Speech halting and uneven with long pauses and/or incomplete thoughts; Little sustained speech	Speech choppy and/or slow with frequent pauses; Expresses several complete thoughts	Some hesitation but continues; Expresses many complete thoughts	Speech continuous with few pauses or stumbling
Pronunciation (x2)	Frequently interferes with communication	Occasionally interferes with communication	Does not interfere with communication	Enhances communication
Vocabulary (x2)	Inadequate and/or inaccurate use of vocabulary	Somewhat adequate and/or accurate use of vocabulary; Limited range of vocabulary	Generally accurate and appropriate with varied range of vocabulary; Uses few idiomatic expressions correctly	Accurate and appropriate with wide range of vocabulary; Uses several idiomatic expressions appropriately
Grammar/Language Structures (x2)	Inadequate and/or inaccurate use of English grammar	Emerging use of basic language structures (<i>basic English grammar, word order, subject, verb, articles, word endings, etc.</i>)	Mastery of basic English language structures	Mastery of basic English language structures with some use of advanced English language structures (<i>metaphor, gradience, subordinate clauses, direct objects, etc.</i>)
Presentation (x1)	Insecure; Little or no eye contact; Presentation hesitant, halting; Did not stay within time allotment; Content barely comprehensible; Frequent listener interpretation required; Difficult to hear	Somewhat insecure; Occasional eye contact; Presentation somewhat smooth; Stays close to allotted time; Content generally comprehensible; Some listener interpretation required; Generally appropriate speaking volume	Comfortable with self; Generally good eye contact; Presentation smooth and natural; Stays within allotted time; Content comprehensible; Requires minimal listener interpretation; Uses appropriate speaking volume	Self assured; Maintains meaningful eye contact; Presentation animated and engaging; Stays within allotted time; Content readily comprehensible; Requires no listener interpretation; Uses appropriate and expressive speaking volume
Preparation (x1)	Minimal preparation; Content undeveloped; Repetitive; No visuals to support the listener	Some preparation evident; Content expressed with limited elaboration or detail; Visuals appear hastily prepared and /or not engaging	Careful preparation; Content expressed with adequate elaboration and detail; Effective use of visuals	Thorough preparation; Content is richly developed with extensive elaboration and detail; Excellent use of visuals



Student Oral Language Observation Matrix (SOLOM)

The SOLOM is not a test per se. A test is a set of structured tasks given in a standard way. The SOLOM is a rating scale that teachers can use to assess their students' command of oral language on the basis of what they observe on a continual basis in a variety of situations - class discussions, playground interactions, encounters between classes. The teacher matches a student's language performance in a five mains - listening comprehension, vocabulary, fluency, grammar, and pronunciation - to descriptions on a five-point scale for each (See Figure 1). The scores for individual domains can be considered, or they can be combined into a total score with a range of five through 25, where approximately 19 or 20 can be considered proficient. SOLOM scores represent whether a student can participate in oral language tasks typically expected in the classroom at his or her grade level.

Because it describes a range of proficiency from non-proficient to fluent, the SOLOM can be used to track annual progress. This, in turn, can be used in program evaluation, and as some of the criteria for exit from alternative instructional programs. However, to be used for these purposes, it is important to ensure that all teachers who use it undergo reliability training so that scores are comparable across teachers. For this purpose, a training video has been produced by Montebello School District in California.

The SOLOM does not require a dedicated testing situation. To complete it, teachers simply need to know the criteria for the various ratings and observe their students' language practices with those criteria in mind. Therein lies the greatest value of the SOLOM and similar approaches:

- it fixes teachers' attention on language-development goals;
- it keeps them aware of how their students are progressing in relation to those goals; and
- it reminds them to set up oral-language-use situations that allow them to observe the student, as well as provide the students with language-development activities.

While observing, teachers should be attuned to the specific features of a student's speech that influenced their rating. They can use this information as a basis of instruction. The SOLOM is sufficiently generic to be applicable to other language besides English.

The SOLOM is not commercially published. It was originally developed by the San Jose Area Bilingual Consortium and has undergone revisions with leadership from the Bilingual Education Office of the California Department of Education. It is within the public domain and can be copied, modified, or adapted to meet local needs.

Directions for Administering the SOLOM:

Based on your observation of the student, indicate with an "X" across the category which best describes the student's abilities.

- The SOLOM should only be administered by persons who themselves score at level "4" or above in all categories in the language being assessed.
- Students scoring at level "1" in all categories can be said to have no proficiency in the language.

7.C.2

SOLOM Teacher Observation Student Oral Language Observation Matrix

Student's Name:		Grade:		Date:	
Language Observed:		Administered By (signature):			
	1	2	3	4	5
A. Comprehension	Cannot be said to understand even simple conversation.	Has great difficulty following what is said. Can comprehend only social conversation spoken slowly and with frequent repetitions.	Understands most of what is said at slower-than-normal speed with repetitions.	Understands nearly everything at normal speech. Although occasional repetition may be necessary.	Understands everyday conversation and normal classroom discussions.
B. Fluency	Speech so halting and fragmentary as to make conversation virtually impossible.	Usually hesitant; often forced into silence by language limitations.	Speech in everyday conversation and classroom discussion frequently disrupted by the student's search for the correct manner of expression	Speech in everyday conversation and classroom discussions generally fluent, with occasional lapses while the student searches for the correct manner of expression.	Speech in everyday conversation and classroom discussions fluent and effortless; approximating that of a native speaker.
C. Vocabulary	Vocabulary limitations so extreme as to make conversation virtually impossible.	Misuse of words and very limited; comprehension quite difficult.	Student frequently uses wrong words; conversation somewhat limited because of inadequate vocabulary.	Student occasionally uses inappropriate terms and/or must rephrase ideas because of lexical inadequacies.	Use of vocabulary and idioms approximate that of a native speaker.
D. Pronunciation	Pronunciation problems so severe as to make speech virtually unintelligible.	Very hard to understand because of pronunciation problems. Must frequently repeat in order to make him/herself understood.	Pronunciation problems necessitate concentration on the part of the listener and occasionally lead to misunderstanding.	Always intelligible, although the listener is conscious of a definite accent and occasional inappropriate intonation patterns.	Pronunciation and intonation approximate that of a native speaker.
E. Grammar	Errors in grammar and word order so severe as to make speech virtually unintelligible.	Grammar and word order errors make comprehension difficult. Must often rephrase and/or restrict him/herself to basic patterns.	Makes frequent errors of grammar and word order that occasionally obscure meaning.	Occasionally makes grammatical and/or word order errors that do not obscure meaning.	Grammar and word order approximate that of a native speaker.

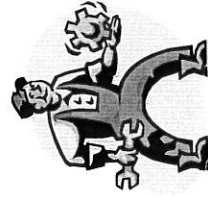
Mechanical, Meaningful, Communicative Language-Teaching Activities

COMMUNICATIVE

Activities involve the transfer of new information/ideas to others via linguistic (and other) channels.

MEANINGFUL

Meaning is added, but teacher is still in control, and student responses are entirely predictable.



MECHANICAL

Imitative, teacher-controlled, and perhaps meaningless (to students) language behavior, but it may give observers the illusion of communication.

DIALOGUE / DRILL

■ INSTRUCTIONAL GOAL:

For students to produce language structures in context with emphasis on pronunciation

■ TARGET STUDENTS:

Students ready to produce a complete sentence

The use of dialogues and drills to develop speaking skills is an outgrowth of the audiolingual method (ALM). Three key concepts form the underlying principles of this method:

1. Since the primary language and the target language have separate grammatical and pronunciation systems, they should be kept apart in the classroom. Rather than translation, the teacher should use realia (real clothing, real fruit, etc.), pictures, and gestures to create a meaningful context for the language.
2. Grammar is learned inductively. Therefore, students should not be presented with rules. Rather they should be given examples from which they are able to deduce the rules.
3. Language learning is habit formation. The teacher should provide a model for the students to mimic.

The dialogue introduces vocabulary and grammatical patterns in context with an emphasis on pronunciation. Students "overlearn" the language by repeating it until they can produce the patterns without stopping to think or translate.

Following the dialogue, the teacher uses a variety of drills to practice sounds, intonation patterns, vocabulary, and structure. The teacher models natural speed, volume, intonation, and stress and allows students enough oral practice for their language to also become natural.

Drills can be mechanical, meaningful, or communicative. *Mechanical drills* depend solely upon the teacher's oral cues for a response, and there is only one correct way of responding. Because of this control, students do not need to understand the drill in order to respond correctly. *Meaningful drills* also depend on the teacher, but involve a situation, reading, or something that is common knowledge for the whole class. The teacher supplies students with information necessary for responding and knows what the response should be, but there is more than one way to respond. In *communicative drills*, students themselves determine the response, offering information about themselves and their "real" world outside the classroom. Although the response is not controlled, students are using learned language patterns.

There are four common drill types: *repetition and backward buildup* (for practice in pronunciation and intonation patterns), *substitution* (for practice in vocabulary), *transformation* (for practice in previously learned structures), and *question/answer* (for student-student communication). They can all be mechanical, meaningful, or communicative depending on the cues used and how controlled they are by the teacher.