Improving Proficiency Descriptors in the 21st Century: Incorporating Diversity, Equity and Inclusion

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January 2024
Proficiency Guidelines/Scales: Background

• “Scales... create transparency and coherence” (North, 1993)
• “CEFR is a tool for reflection, communication and empowerment” (Trim, 2014)
• Can scales developed for monolingual learners be generalized to plurilingual learners? (Cox, Malone & Winke, 2018)
• “Scales and their accompanying tests and philosophies can provide washback to teaching and learning from curricula to classroom assessments, to student self-assessment” (Harsch & Malone, 2020)
Who uses language proficiency scales?

- U.S. Government
- Employers
- Universities
- K-12 schools
Goals

• Provide context for project
• Describe goals for revisions
• Explain process
• Discuss current findings
• Review next steps
Context

• About ACTFL
• Brief history of the Guidelines
• Reasons for revision
ACTFL’s Vision

ACTFL envisions an interconnected world where everyone benefits from and values a multilingual and multicultural education.
What We’re Known For
ACTFL Strategic Plan

Advocacy & Outreach

Diversity, Equity, & Inclusion

Professional Learning

Research

Teacher Recruitment & Retention
ACTFL Proficiency Guidelines: Summary

• A set of criteria describing five levels of language proficiency
• Independent of any textbook, curriculum, or sequence
• Used in academic, government, and business settings
• Includes four skills: listening, speaking, reading, and writing
• Basis for official ACTFL test development and ratings in over 120 languages
• Shared understanding of levels across languages
ACTFL Proficiency Guidelines: History

• Evolved from Interagency Language Roundtable (ILR SLDs)*
• Released in 1986; revised in 1999 and 2012
• Revised to reflect lower levels of proficiency compared to government settings
• Genesis of ACTFL OPI® and accompanying tester preparation workshop and materials in 1982
• Basis for certified tests of speaking, listening, reading, and writing in multiple languages
  • Testers of speaking and writing certified by ACTFL
  • Testing suite articulated from Age 8 to adult
K-12 Assessments

AAPPL
ACTFL ASSESSMENT OF PERFORMANCE TOWARD PROFICIENCY IN LANGUAGES

ACTFL OPI & WPT
FOR THE SEAL OF BILITERACY

ALIRA
ACTFL LATIN INTERPRETIVE READING ASSESSMENT
Post-Secondary/Beyond Assessments
Assessments cont.
Goals for Guidelines’ Revision

• Examine needs of general and specific audiences
  • Initially higher education/post-secondary
  • Now grades 3 – adult
• Examine and consider ILR descriptor process and outcomes
• Increase understanding and accessibility to wide audiences (teachers, administrators, testers) (Grapin & Lee, 2022)
• Identify language that is unwelcoming or inaccessible
• Revisit existing language and clarify structure, organization, message, and purpose
• Monitor vertical and horizontal progression (Berger, 2020)
• Emphasize ACTFL’s strategic pillars
• Learn from others’ experience (ILR SLDs)
• Align with ILR SLD revisions
Process

Internal (ACTFL Staff)
Professional Learning, Testing, HR, Executive Director N=8

Advisory Board: Experts (OPI, DEI, SLA, Teacher preparation, pedagogy, heritage language) (N=22)

Editor (decades of experience in language pedagogy, assessment and the Guidelines)

Regional participation (active language teachers and administrators) N=>300 surveys and 100 focus groups

Town Halls N => 300 ACTFL members
Behind the Process

• Spring 2022 – Present
• Include a wide variety of stakeholders
  • Internal
  • Experts
    • Variety of languages and levels of experience (primary, middle, secondary, higher ed, other)
    • Certified ACTFL testers and facilitators
    • Experts in SLA, heritage language, diversity, equity and inclusion, language teacher preparation
  • Member Practitioners
    • Languages
    • Teaching levels
    • Familiarity with Guidelines
Behind the process (continued)

• Employ multiple methods of eliciting feedback
  • Meetings
  • Surveys
  • Interviews
  • Focus groups

• Follow an iterative process

• Incorporate feedback from different perspectives and expertise
  • Examined existing documents (ILR SLDs, World Readiness Standards for Learning Languages, ACTFL Performance Descriptors for Language Learners, NCSSFL-ACTFL Can-do Statements, prior versions of Guidelines)

• Utilize a professional editor: Deborah Kennedy
Findings

• Consensus on main issues across groups
  • Accessibility
  • Audience
  • Formatting

• Discussion
  • Length
  • Approach
  • Audience

• Inclusion
  • Appreciation for broad geographic reach
  • Discussion between and among members beyond staff and “experts”
Quotes from pre-revision

• Consistent information and wording across (sub)levels. Information parsed out and organized to make more digestible.

• In some places, extreme clarity and in others, unnecessarily long or redundant or unclear

• De-center ‘native’... Consider rewriting so that guidelines apply to all language users.

• Not accessible enough to give [learners, parents, administrators] a chance to engage

• Inclusive language, room for social justice, more application for classroom use (where “spontaneous real-world situations” are challenging to replicate)
Quotes from Focus Groups

• I really like the differentiation of [proficiency and performance] and how to assess. We have needed these changes for some time. This will greatly improve ACTFL workshop training experiences, materials, and much more for workshop participants.

• The revised wording is much more accessible to those who do not have a strong background in language acquisition. I often find that in training others in the guidelines, I have to simplify the language. This revision does that. I also like that there is a description of proficiency and performance, which is an important distinction to make.
Quotes from Town Halls

• Correlations with performance indicators are helpful
• *We love that “native” has been removed from the documents - the term can be too complicated for a doc like this*
• Guidelines are more concise, but also clearer (descriptions are richer, which will help with evaluation)
• The effort to align the new guidelines with the Can-Do Statements is apparent and helps to bring specificity through examples
Issue: Superior and Distinguished

• Terms for highest levels of the Guidelines
• Infrequently attained in academic contexts
• Perceived as elitist/lofty: superior does not give great vibes and neither does distinguished
• [Many] already know what these terms mean, could require a lot of re-education.
• Suggestions:
  • Don’t need both/no issue
  • Technical
  • Academic
  • Polished
  • Superlative
  • Expansive/extended
  • Accomplished
  • Professional
  • Expert
  • Specialist
Findings to Date: Actions

• Make wording consistent across levels and domains
• Need for more description and “fewer words”
  • Short overview for introduction
  • Use language/bullet points instead of sentences
• Emphasis on accessibility of language/clarity*
  • Non-language educators/colleagues
  • Parents
  • Learners
• Questions on names for levels
  • Superior
  • Distinguished
Findings to Date: Actions (continued)

• Alignment to and complement
  • *World Readiness Standards for Learning Languages*
  • *ACTFL Performance Descriptors for Language Learners*
  • *NCSSFL-ACTFL Can-do Statements*

• Eliminate exclusionary words
  • Native speaker*
  • Target language/culture
  • “25 cent words” like “interlocutor”
Conclusions

• Transparency and inclusion
• Eliminate barriers to understanding
• Change the narrative regarding the “ideal” language learner/user
• ACTFL goal: to extend reach to non-experts!
  • Clarify communication
Next Steps

• Integrate all possible and practical ideas
• Elicit input from member educators using Guidelines in classroom settings
• Reveal at Town Halls and 2023 ACTFL Convention
• Release: April 2024
Acknowledgements

• Editor: Deborah Kennedy, Key Words
• Consultant
  • Hannah Lukow, Penn State
• Advisory Board
• 800+ active WL teachers and administrators from across the world
• Rachel Brooks, FBI and
• The ACTFL Assessment and Research Staff:
  • Meg Malone
  • Carly Favero
  • Camelot Marshall
  • Reuben Vyn
Thank you!