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Summary

The fourth edition of the *ACTFL Proficiency Guidelines* was released in April 2024. This is the first update since the third edition was released in 2012. These language proficiency guidelines are an essential reference for language assessment in academic and professional fields in numerous nations around the globe, especially in the United States. The guidelines are considered the basis for assessing proficiency in more than 100 languages (Language Testing International, 2024). Most language proficiency tests are categorized as high-stakes tests because they have important consequences, such as determining whether a person is qualified to enroll in a university or get a job (Coombe, 2018).

The 2024 *ACTFL Proficiency Guidelines* include an index, an introduction, and a series of level descriptors for each of the four language skills—speaking, writing, listening, and reading. These descriptors are arranged as a pyramid consisting of five main levels (novice, intermediate, advanced, superior, and distinguished) and their sub-levels.

The first few pages serve as a manual for using the guidelines, providing an overview that explains the criteria separating the levels based on functions, tasks, accuracy, context, and text type. Thus, the introduction outlines the nature of each of the main and sub-proficiency levels.

The introduction also discusses *modes of communication*, which it categorizes as interpretive, interpersonal, and presentational. The interpretive mode is one in which the recipient of a message cannot interact with the speaker or writer, such as while listening to a newscast or reading a novel. The interpersonal mode is bidirectional, meaning the producer and receiver of the language communicate and exchange roles, such as during a phone call or a face-to-face conversation, and the presentational mode is unidirectional like the first, but this mode concerns the speaker or writer who cannot check the recipient's understanding, such as when sending a voice or written message.

The introduction then differentiates between the terms *proficiency* and *performance*, highlighting that the latter is linked to specific course content, as is the case of school curricula, while the former is not restricted to a specific curriculum or content.

The relationships between four important ACTFL publications—the roles of which have often perplexed language education professionals—are then explained: The primary use of the *ACTFL Proficiency Guidelines* (2024), the subject of this review, is to assess the language proficiency of individuals regardless of the curriculum, content, course, or method of instruction in which they were taught. The *World-Readiness Standards for Learning Languages* (2015) describe what students need to know and be able to do when learning another language. It is written for grades K–16 and is primarily used for curriculum planning and classroom teaching.

The *ACTFL Performance Descriptors for Language Learners* (2012) describe a learner's ability to engage in communicative tasks that have been introduced and practiced in standards-based learning contexts and can be used by teachers and learners to set learning goals and develop activities for use in formal language instruction.

The *NCSSFL-ACTFL Can-Do Statements* (2017) describe what language users can do independently at each sub-level, helping them to pave the way to higher levels. The can-do statements do not specify what must be learned or taught at each sub-level; rather, they show the skills and functions that can be performed with full control at each sub-level. Because they are designed for learner use, they encourage individuals to engage in active goal-setting and monitoring of their progress.

One of the primary distinctions between the four documents, according to the guidelines' introduction, is that the proficiency guidelines are categorized according to the main language skills whereas the other three documents are categorized by the interpretive, interactive, and presentational modes of communication. After providing a summary of the guidelines' history, the introduction moves on to emphasize the important features of the current edition.

The body of the guidelines follows the introduction. Here, level descriptors are given based on the four skill categories, separated into five main levels—novice, intermediate, advanced, superior, and distinguished—along with their sub-levels. In this review, we will restrict our discussion to how the guidelines provide the descriptors for speaking because the same system is followed for the other skills.

The speaking guidelines lay out the content and methods of spoken language communication for speakers. The speech levels are categorized based on a preface that

describes the criteria. These include the functions and tasks that an individual can perform with language, the level of precision with which they speak, the context in which they use language and the content they deal with, and the type of text they produce. These criteria have already been introduced in the introduction to the document in general.

The main and sub-levels of the skill are then defined, and tables of performance characteristics for each level are presented based on the ACTFL Performance Descriptors, which are organized according to the interactive and presentational modes of communication.

The guidelines reiterate the definitions of performance and competence and the relationship between them, clarifying the terms used in the guidelines document as well as the corresponding terms in the performance document. This clarification is helpful as some of these terms, such as “function,” are the same, while others, such as “text type,” which corresponds to “discourse type” in the performance document, change in the guidelines. The accuracy criterion in the guidelines corresponds to four variables in the performance document: Comprehension and comprehensibility include language control, vocabulary, communication strategies, and cultural awareness. The document arranges the speaking descriptors from novice to distinguished, and each level is reviewed as in previous versions of the guidelines, except that the order is reversed. After an introductory overview of the general characteristics of proficiency at a level, the sub-levels are reviewed from low to high (low, mid, and high). The descriptors for the other skills (writing, listening, and reading) are then presented in the same manner in the remaining pages of the document.

Evaluation

The latest version of the ACTFL guidelines is broader and clearer than previous versions; whereas the 2012 ACTFL guidelines consisted of 24 pages with approximately 9,352 words, the current version is 56 pages with approximately 22,195 words. This version is keen on simplification and clarity, and this is shown in the following updates:

- There is an eight-page introduction, providing much more detail than the previous version, which was only one page.
- It differentiates between similar terms (e.g., proficiency and performance).
- It explains the role of the guidelines and the other three ACTFL documents in the language teaching process, which was not well understood previously.
- The descriptors in the document use simplified phrases, such as “are familiar with” (ACTFL, 2024, p. 15) instead of “highly predictable” (ACTFL, 2012, p. 9-13-19).
- The overview of the novice level in the new edition has 87 vocabulary words compared to 51 in the prior version. The main goal here is to improve clarity.

The levels are arranged from lowest to highest, whereas the previous version arranged them from highest to lowest. This is more logical because it reflects the natural order in which a person learns and builds language proficiency. Although the evaluation criteria remain the same compared to the previous version, the newest version clarifies

them in more than one section and establishes the acronym FACT from their initial letters (functions, accuracy, context and content, and text type) as a useful mnemonic. This addition is simple, but it may help those who are interested in remembering these criteria. However, this clarity was only present in the OPI workshops and another booklet given at oral proficiency training workshops, not in the guidelines document, meaning that reading the descriptors individually was not enough for the reader to discover these criteria independently.

Earlier versions stated that the guidelines were not based on a particular theory, but the current version makes no mention of this. It is worth considering that one of the foundations of test construction is “construct validity,” which means the degree to which a language exam accurately reflects a fundamental principle of language acquisition (Coombe, 2018, p. 15).

There are many definitions of language proficiency and so-called theories of communicative competence, but the guidelines do not mention any of them. However, at the same time, the descriptors include dimensions that incorporate the components of communicative competence according to prevailing theories, as the descriptors cover aspects of sounds, vocabulary, grammatical competence, social culture, and communication strategies. (Elhadki, 2021). Although their main use is language assessment, the guidelines do not mention any details about the methods of standardizing these descriptors, which has been a persistent issue since the first version (see Chalhoub-Deville, 1997).

Reference to native speakers as a criterion for language proficiency has been removed from the latest version; previous versions of the guidelines considered it the yardstick by which we measure a learner’s language, and the 2012 and the previous guidelines also refer to the “highly articulate, well-educated language user” (ACTFL, 2012, p. 3). This has been criticized by some researchers (e.g., Chalhoub-Deville, 1997) since the first version was released. The main reason for criticizing this idea was the difficulty of determining who the intended language user is, especially with dominant languages in large areas of the world, as well as the difficulty of determining who is “well-educated.” It is also worth noting that the practice of avoiding comparison to native speakers and treating the language learner as a social agent can be previously found in the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages 2020 (Companion Volume), where the language learner is evaluated solely on his or her ability to communicate (Council of Europe, 2020).

The new version includes content domains that did not exist at the novice level before, such as greetings, introductions, and courtesy. In the new version, language impairment is presented more simply and independently by stating that “speech may be strongly influenced by patterns of other languages that the individual knows” (ACTFL, 2024, p. 15) instead of linking the deficit to a native speaker’s understanding of non-native speakers. Previous documents considered the native speaker’s understanding of the learner’s speech or lack thereof as one of the criteria for categorization and therefore repeatedly used the phrase “to be understood by native speakers of the language” (ACTFL, 2012, p. 5-6-7). The different terminology used for the same concept between the four

ACTFL documents, such as text type, can be confusing to the reader, so in future editions, it is preferable to standardize the terminology between them.

Overall, the fourth edition of the guidelines is clearer than the previous editions, and it corrects a few of the flaws in the earlier versions, such as the use of native speakers as a marker of proficiency, the use of difficult expressions, and the logic of the order of the levels. This version is also better integrated with other ACTFL documents (*World-Readiness Standards*, *Performance Descriptors*, and *Can-Do Statements*) as readers previously did not know the relationship between these documents and their role in the language teaching process, and it clarifies the methodology for codifying these descriptors.

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