Proficiency-based writing: The ACTFL writing proficiency guidelines and classroom implications

A CeLTA Workshop
by Daniel J. Reed, Ph.D.
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The purpose of this workshop

- To try out some ideas for classroom activities that lead students to higher levels of proficiency
- Given that progress up through the broad ranges of a proficiency scale takes months, what can we do from day to day?
- What is the best way to align the levels of difficulty of tasks with the levels of abilities of our students?
- How can we make these tasks as authentic as possible?
Handouts we will be using

- ACTFL Proficiency Guidelines 2012
- Samples of writing at each major ACTFL level
- ACTFL Performance Descriptors for Language Learners
- Developing Speaking and Writing Tasks for Second Language Assessment: A Miniguide for Assessment Development (a.k.a., “Miniguide”)
The ACTFL Guidelines

- Five broad bands (ranges) of language proficiency:
  - Novice | Intermediate | Advanced | Superior | Distinguished
- A common scale for listening, speaking, reading, and writing abilities
- Also common across language materials and tasks:
  - Reading texts, listening passages
  - Questions about the texts and passages
# ACTFL/US GOV levels and functions

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>ACTFL Level</th>
<th>US Gov</th>
<th>Language Functions</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Distinguished</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>Ability to tailor language to specific audience, persuade, negotiate. Deal with nuance and subtlety.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Superior</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>Discuss topics extensively, support opinions, hypothesize. Deal with linguistically unfamiliar situation</td>
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<tr>
<td>Advanced High</td>
<td>2+</td>
<td>Narrate and describe in past, present and future and deal effectively with an unanticipated complication</td>
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<tr>
<td>Advanced Mid</td>
<td>2</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Advanced Low</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Intermediate High</td>
<td>1+</td>
<td>Create with language, initiate, maintain and bring to a close simple conversations by asking and responding to simple questions</td>
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<tr>
<td>Intermediate Mid</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Intermediate Low</td>
<td></td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Novice High</td>
<td>0+</td>
<td>Communicate minimally with formulaic and rote utterances, lists and phrases</td>
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<tr>
<td>Novice Mid</td>
<td>0</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Novice Low</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Major Level</td>
<td>Global Function/Task</td>
<td>Context</td>
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<tr>
<td>Superior</td>
<td>Can discuss extensively by supporting opinions, abstracting and hypothesizing</td>
<td>Most formal and informal settings</td>
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<tr>
<td>Advanced</td>
<td>Can describe and narrate in major time/aspect frames</td>
<td>Most informal and some formal settings</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Intermediate</td>
<td>Can maintain simple face-to-face conversation by asking and responding to simple questions</td>
<td>Some informal settings and limited number of transactional situations</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Novice</td>
<td>Can product only formulaic utterances, lists and enumerations</td>
<td>Highly predictable common daily settings</td>
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Writing samples at each major ACTFL level

(See handout)

• **Distinguished** and **Superior** samples are interesting, but not relevant to our teaching contexts

• **Advanced** is realistic for our upper-level students (also for teacher candidates)

• **Intermediate** is the range where we find most of our students

• **Novice** of course is relevant to first-year students
Aligning task levels and learner ability levels

- Task level lower than ability level: warm up
- Task level same as ability: develop fluency
- Task level one level up: develop higher-level proficiency (role for instruction)
- Task level two levels up risks underestimating student ability and may reinforce incorrect usage of forms (using known forms in creative ways, which could be good or bad)
Performance-based achievements distinct from proficiency
From ACTFL Performance Descriptors for LLs:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Assessing Performance</th>
<th>Assessing Proficiency</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• <strong>Based on Instruction</strong>: Describes what the language learner can demonstrate based on what was learned [or taught].</td>
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<td>• <strong>Practiced</strong>: Tasks are derived from the language functions and vocabulary that learners have practiced or rehearsed but which are applied to other tasks within familiar contexts.</td>
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<tr>
<td>• <strong>Familiar Content and Context</strong>: Content based on what was learned, practiced, or rehearsed; all within a context similar but not identical to how learned.</td>
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<td>• <strong>Demonstrated performance</strong>: To be evaluated within a range, must be able to demonstrate the features of the domains of a given range in those contexts and content areas that have been learned and practiced.</td>
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<td>• <strong>Independent of specific instruction or curriculum</strong>: Describes what the language user can do regardless of where, when or how the language was acquired [“types” of tasks such as descriptive, narrative, supported opinion]</td>
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<tr>
<td>• <strong>Spontaneous</strong>: Tasks are non-rehearsed situations (but of similar type to those practiced). [“generalized abilities”]</td>
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<td>• <strong>Broad Content and Context</strong>: Context and content are those that are appropriate for the given level.</td>
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<tr>
<td>• <strong>Sustained performance across all the tasks and contexts for the level</strong>: To be at a level, must demonstrate consistent patterns of all the criteria for a given level, all of the time.</td>
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How can proficiency be developed in the classroom?

- Given that you cannot directly “teach” proficiency,
  - classroom activities should target “performance-based achievements” (same activities for teaching/learning and assessing)
  - prepare students to do specific tasks by giving them vocabulary, sample responses, etc., then
    - provide rehearsal opportunities
    - repeat until generalization is evident
Performance-based assessments
(Miniguide, p.5)

▲ Contextualized
The language learner is provided with a meaningful context for real language use. Tasks are organized around one theme, which helps to ground the student in the context. The test taker knows what role s/he is to play, and with whom to interact. Each task is designed so that the next task logically follows, allowing students to build on the information they’ve already given.

▲ Authentic
Tasks are designed to present test takers with a real communicative purpose for a real audience.

▲ Task based
Test takers must carry out a well-defined task designed to elicit specific use of the target language.

▲ Learner centered
Tasks are realistic for students learning the target language, in terms of age, cultural background, level of cognitive and linguistic maturity, etc. Students are expected to make responses based on their actual circumstances, background, and interests.
Create 4–5 segments on a theme
Miniguide, p. 11:

Theme: Keeping a journal
Your teacher has given you a chance to earn extra credit in your German class by keeping a journal in German. You decide to take advantage of the offer. After looking at the assignment, you decide to start right away. Write legibly Write as much as you can Show what you can do

Segment 1: A great day
Situation: Your teacher tells you to think about what a really great day is like for you, and to write about it in your journal.
Warm-up: Think about your idea of a great day, then take a minute to answer the following questions in German or English.
• What are your surroundings like (location, sights, sounds, smells, etc.)?
• What do you do?
• Whom are you with, if anyone?
Task: Describe, in German, your idea of a great day. You might want to include 1) a description of your surroundings; 2) what you do; 3) whom you are with, if anyone; 4) how you feel.
Describe your great day in seven to ten sentences in German.
Questions to ask yourself when designing an Intermediate writing assessment activity

- What is the general setting ("contextualization" at the top)?
- Does the student have a good reason to use the target language? (also in "contextualization")
- Does the topic invite the writer to show a sufficient range of vocabulary? ("situation")
- Is the task clearly defined ("task")
- Does the task avoid specific background or cultural knowledge? ("task")
- Does the task elicit sentences and not lists? ("task")
Parts of a writing assessment (see slide 12 for an example)

Miniguide, p. 10:
• A theme (top left)
• Contextualization paragraph (at beginning)
• Segment title
• Situation
• Warm-up
• Task, followed by prompt
Another sample from the Miniguide (p. 7)

To test **achievement** of proficiency-oriented goals, your end-of-chapter writing assessment could read as follows:

**Situation**

You just received an e-mail message from your friend *(name)* in *(country)* and he/she tells about all of the things he/she must do at *(school/home/to get ready for a party)*. You answer the e-mail message right away and tell *(name)* what you have to do. Write an e-mail message to *(name)* and tell him/her what you have to do *(to help around the house/for school/in class/to get ready for a party)*. You may want to mention when, where, or for whom you do these things, whether you do them with a friend or a family member, and whether or not you like doing these things.

**Task**

Be sure to write about the things you have to do using a verb or expression of obligation. Write a short e-mail message *(at least 7 sentences)* to *(name)* and tell him/her what you have to do this weekend.
Assignment for you! (work in pairs or threes)

- Design a similar activity to what we’ve just seen for your target language.

- Include all of the following parts:
  - A theme (top left)
  - Contextualization paragraph (at beginning)
  - Segment title
  - Situation
  - Warm-up
  - Task, followed by prompt

(Hint: use the sample writing task on p. 6 of the Miniguide, as well as the grids on pp. 13-16)
Follow-up activities

• List a few more segment titles relevant to your theme
• Outline a task on the same theme (with same segment title if possible) that would elicit Advanced writing (from truly Advanced writers)
• Check out the evaluation rubric on p. 17 of the Miniguide. How would you use it?
Questions????

Send questions to me (Dan):
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