

Benchmarking language proficiency for aspiring global business leaders: The Lauder Institute of Management & International Studies at the University of Pennsylvania

Case Study

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Summary

Students at the Lauder Institute, University of Pennsylvania, are enrolled in a joint degree. They pursue a Master's in Business Administration (MBA) at the Wharton School (or a JD from Penn Carey Law School) alongside a Master's of Arts in International Studies degree (MA) at the School of Arts and Sciences. The Lauder Language and Culture program (Lauder) is unique, combining world languages

and coursework in the social sciences (political science and economics) and history to develop business-focused learners for success in a globalized economy. Leveraging existing language proficiency and amplifying it with advanced coursework and intensive international study abroad are pillars of Lauder's innovative approach.

This pioneering program for aspiring global business leaders uses, as one of its assessments, the ACTFL Oral Proficiency Interview® (OPI) to measure student progress toward, and attainment of, Advanced to Superior level of oral proficiency. From the outset, admissions requirements of a minimum of Advanced Low on the ACTFL Proficiency Scale ensure learners are prepared for graduate level, credit bearing, inter-disciplinary content-based instruction in the target language.

Challenges:

- Need for an externally validated language proficiency assessment to benchmark student abilities at the start and end of the program.
- Requirement to ensure proficiency in navigating real-world language situations for global business.

Solutions:

- Use of OPI as the key assessment tool to evaluate language proficiency.
- Continuous testing with the OPI to measure progress during the course of study.

Outcomes:

- Benchmarking of language skills to promote goal setting and metacognition.
- Alignment of proficiency goals among faculty and students.
- Promoting targeted instruction and improving proficiency among students.



Challenges/Needs

Lauder aims to develop global business leaders who are well versed in local languages and perspectives. The program uses valuable holistic internal language measures; however, an externally validated assessment of proficiency is necessary to evaluate progress at both the entry and exit points of the course. Given Lauder's aims and participants' need to navigate diverse language functions and unexpected challenges in future employment, selecting a language assessment to measure their ability to converse and negotiate meaning in real-time was essential. Moreover, this measurement tool would need to be reliable, readily available, and of short duration. Ideally, the selected tool would be able to be administered at several intervals throughout the two-year course of study to pinpoint proficiency and measure growth.

Solution(s)

Since it welcomed its first class in 1984, the Lauder Institute has used the OPI as their key language assessment of oral proficiency. As Lauder's Language and Culture Program curricular goals are aligned with the *ACTFL Proficiency Guidelines* and structured to support language proficiency and cultural knowledge, the OPI is a natural fit.

The OPI is conducted by an ACTFL-certified OPI tester. Official OPIs are double-rated. After the live interview is rated, a second ACTFL-certified OPI rater rates the recorded conversation, rendering the rating official. In cases of discrepancy, a third rater may be brought in. Importantly, only ACTFL assessments, like the OPI, can confer an official ACTFL rating that truly aligns with the *ACTFL Proficiency Guidelines*.

Broadly, the Lauder language program's objectives are to improve learners' literacy and oral proficiency. In addition to the content-based courses delivered in the target language, the language curriculum is rounded out by a mandatory, intensive, international study abroad experience which includes a five-week (currently, duration has varied over the years) immersion course. To ensure participants are progressing in their language skills, they must take the OPI each semester while enrolled in their Lauder language courses. At the conclusion of the program of study, learners are expected to attain a Superior in their language of study, or otherwise meet other graduation criteria with a required minimum rating of Advanced Mid.

Implementation

Applicants to the Lauder program schedule their initial OPI for admittance directly with LTI. After matriculation, Lauder Institute works directly with Language Testing International® (LTI) to schedule, pay for, administer, and proctor each student's double-rated official OPI. Lauder staff works closely with both LTI and ACTFL personnel to ensure smooth implementation of the testing program.

One critical piece of implementation was requesting a Diagnostic Grid for each test taker to help guide reflection and self-directed learning. In addition to a brief description of the type of performance typically observed at a specific level of proficiency, a Diagnostic Grid further evaluates language performance indicators (e.g., functional ability in the language). The grid provides a sense of what a test candidate has demonstrated that they can and cannot do, as evidenced by the language they

produced during their assessment. Diagnostic Grids can be ordered when requesting an ACTFL Oral Proficiency Interview – Computer® (OPIc), OPI, or ACTFL Writing Proficiency Test® (WPT).

Participants who achieve a Superior rating on the ACTFL scale may waive one OPI per semester, but it is not mandatory. Instead, they may choose to work with faculty on more advanced prompts and take an OPI using the Interagency Language Roundtable scale (ILR) protocol, which includes unique conversation prompts not included in an OPI. Learners with Superior level proficiency, on meeting program criteria, may also choose to take a course in a different Lauder language, take content language courses that emphasize superior-level functions, or pursue approved courses at the School of Arts and Sciences.

Outcomes

At this point in time, nearly all Lauder faculty are ACTFL-certified OPI testers or raters. This creates a common framework and language to talk about proficiency and pedagogical strategies to improve proficiency. Understanding a student's proficiency level on the OPI as well as in the classroom allows instructors to focus their efforts to help identify areas of strength and areas for improvement. Leveraging the detailed descriptions of language usage found in the Diagnostic Grids has been crucial to supporting the proficiency gains observed in the Lauder program. Lauder faculty members have

expressed that the diagnostic comments are helpful to them and to the students.

Learners in the Lauder program gain a nuanced understanding of the *ACTFL Proficiency Guidelines* and their own developing language proficiency by means of the OPI experience and regular guidance from their faculty. In this way, learners and their instructors can co-create conditions for advancing language skills, tailoring classroom and one-on-one sessions to best meet each learners' needs and propel them to the next level of proficiency.

The OPI provides a framework of clearly articulated and standardized descriptors of assessment which can be applied consistently to all the 12 Lauder Language & Culture Programs.

— *Haimanti Banerjee, Associate Director at Lauder Institute of Management & International Studies*

Conclusion

With the OPI, students gain confidence in their ability to engage with speakers in the language for personal and professional purposes. OPI ratings sometimes even serve as motivational milestones! Occasionally, Lauder students are frustrated with some results, but faculty work to frame ratings so that learners set goals for improvement, leveraging an OPI's detailed diagnostic comments in conjunction with classroom performance, to propel their proficiency to the next level. ACTFL language proficiency assessments, such as the OPI, can enhance a program like Lauder's by providing a common framework for various language programs and fostering a proficiency-oriented approach among faculty and learners.



Further, it can help to identify other areas of language learning and skills such as critical thinking, situation-based language use, understanding register, and communication dynamics.

The [OPI] results provide a useful benchmark for individual language performance. They help to tailor pedagogical practices for specific language functions and contexts and provide differentiated instruction.

— **Haimanti Banerjee, Associate Director at Lauder Institute of Management & International Studies**

Haimanti encourages other higher education programs that focus on business, law, or international relations to consider implementing an ACTFL language proficiency assessment program as part of the admissions process and course of study. What Lauder has learned is that in addition to faculty guidance, “standardized externally administered assessments can provide a pathway for learners to assess their language learning progress and provide guidelines for developing proficiency.”

For institutions contemplating a move toward implementing language graduation requirements, Haimanti recommends:

- Consider a holistic approach to assessment. Not just use of a single assessment.
- Capture improvement of students’ language abilities.
- Encourage and support faculty to get OPI certification.
- Invite language professionals for professional development opportunities on topics such as understanding of the proficiency-oriented approach, ACTFL proficiency levels, and the mechanics of the OPI.


Standardized externally administered assessments can provide a pathway for learners to assess their language learning progress and provide guidelines for developing proficiency. It can also bolster language learners’ confidence.

— **Haimanti Banerjee, Associate Director at Lauder Institute of Management & International Studies**



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