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Perspectives in Language Teaching: Reaching an Advanced Level

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The ACTFL proficiency guidelines for speaking describe the tasks that speakers can handle at each level, as well as the content, context, accuracy, and discourse types associated with tasks at each level (ACTFL, 2024). These guidelines assume that there are five distinct levels: Distinguished, Superior, Advanced, Intermediate, and Novice. The Advanced, Intermediate, and Novice levels are each divided into three sublevels: a High, a Mid, and a Low (ACTFL, 2024). At the Advanced level, the guidelines state that, in addition to autobiographical topics, the speaker can also engage in topics of community, national, or international interest (ACTFL, 2024).

When it comes to describing language, the guidelines for the Advanced level suggest that speakers can express themselves effectively and the length of the discourse is described as an "oral paragraph" (ACTFL, 2024). When we look more closely at the Advanced Low level, we see that speakers can use communicative strategies such as rephrasing and circumlocution. The mark of Advanced Mid level is "substantial flow." At the Advanced level, speakers often show great fluency; they might level tap into Superior by providing a structured argument to support their opinions and may also construct hypotheses. However, patterns of errors will be seen (ACTFL, 2024). At the same time the Intermediate guideline for speaking is described as a "straightforward survival situation" (ACTFL, 2024), while the Novice guidelines talk about "short messages on highly predictable, everyday topics" (ACTFL, 2024).

The purpose of the paragraph above is not to go through the speaking guidelines of those three levels, but to demonstrate via the selection of a few descriptors that arriving at the Advanced level takes a path that, unlike the Intermediate or the Novice Levels, veers from the daily use of spoken language and its needs. Hence reaching them requires a lot of time and significant effort.

The American Council of Trustees and Alumni (ACTA) reports that only 12% of universities requires at least an Intermediate level (up to 3 semesters) for their language requirement (2019). For most universities, a Novice level will do (2 semesters). While this percentage might be true for most language learners in U.S. universities, there are still some graduate and undergraduate students who need to reach an Advanced Level in the language

they are studying due to the professional nature of their studies (Purpura & Graziano-King, 2004), for research purposes (Geisler, 2007), to be ready for the job market (Di Pietro, Lantolf, & Labarca, 1983; Hutcheon, 2002), or as requirements for their field (Bernhardt, 2001; Byrnes, 2001; Norris & Pfeiffer, 2003).

It is key to mention that the speaking descriptors mentioned above are measured using the ACTFL Oral Proficiency Interview (OPI). Even though language educators in the U.S. are not officially required to adopt the ACTFL OPI proficiency guidelines, these guidelines do have a key role in the educational process as models upon which to base curricula and assessment (Webb, 2002).

In fact, Tschirner and Malone describe the ACTFL OPI as "one of the most common approaches to assessing proficiency in the United States" (2012, p. 1). They add that this form of assessment is used for a variety of purposes such as academic, commercial, and for government purposes (Tschirner and Malone, 2012, p. 3). It is used as an assessment for program entrance, placement, graduation requirement, research initiatives, program evaluation, hiring, promotion, and teacher credentialing, as well as for other language professions (e.g., interpretation) (Tschirner and Malone, 2012, p. 3).

If we agree that some world language learners in U.S. universities will continue to learn languages and either aspire to or need to reach the Advanced level, the question becomes: How can this be attained? How can we move students from the "straightforward survival situation" to mastering circumlocution, speaking in a substantial flow, and delving into social topics while not forgetting that some languages are more difficult to learn than others? The more difficult a language is, the more time is needed for the learners to attain proficiency levels (Foreign Service Institute Language Difficulty Ranking). Language difficulty becomes an added challenge.

Norris and Pfeiffer's work (2003) offers one way to answer this question when they point out "the need for college foreign language departments to address the critical relationship between setting valuable learning standards, developing curriculum and instruction that enables students to attain these standards, and engaging in assessment that illuminates and fosters student learning" (2003, p. 375).

In many ways, I was following Norris and Pfeiffer recommendation above (2003) to ensure that my advanced students (with 6 semesters of Arabic instruction) were progressing.

For example, when it comes to “developing curriculum” I did consider that if at one point they are going to come across the need to talk about topics of “community, national or international interests” then they need to learn about these matters in Arabic-speaking countries. This was one element that I used in designing the curriculum. Thus, the curriculum included topics such as Arabic language and identity, gender equality, and health services for refugees and displaced individuals to name a few. And this is, most likely, what you thought of while you were reading this piece.

The harder part, I must admit, was getting students to speak about these topics in an extended manner that would allow them to speak “abundantly” in “oral paragraphs.” Class discussions of various formats, while a crucial tool, was most of the time not enough to reach that abundance consistently and with enough conviction for my Arabic students. This is where technology, instruction, and assessment were activated to work together to reach that goal. For the “community, national or international” topic at hand, I would create questions that could elicit an extensive answer that could for instance ask for an opinion supported by evidence, for a detailed comparison, a comprehensive contrasting, or a hypothesis that is built on facts learned.

For instance, a question would ask the following: “In the class reading, we learned that the absence of a regulated and organized system is one of the biggest challenges that stands as an obstacle in the way of providing health services for displaced individuals. How can this information be used when planning and designing health services for displaced individuals? Please provide a detailed reply”. At least one such question was always part of class discussions.

Technology was key in providing further practice opportunities that students could use to practice improving these benchmarks. VoiceThread was the tech tool I used. Throughout the semester, students had to complete tasks where they were recording their replies on questions to the example given above. After students recorded their oral responses, they received detailed feedback. The feedback focused on content (how relevant is the reply to the materials read, listened to, and discussed in class.

In addition to possible further information that students might have learned taking other classes or their individual knowledge), meaning and development (ideas, examples, opinions, reasons, points of view, etc.), organization (clarity, focus, coherence, progression of ideas, thesis

development, etc.), Language (use of newly learned vocabulary, word choice, sentence variety, appropriateness, etc.), and finally Conventions (grammar, sentence structure, pronunciation, oral paragraph, format, etc.). Criteria were selected after viewing several rubrics and then considering which would prove more useful for this purpose. The rubric along with performance expectations were explained to the students with examples at the beginning of the semester. The table below shows one example of feedback that a student received for their oral reply. This example is of a reply that minimally reaches expectations.

Table 1: An example of feedback students could receive for their oral replies:

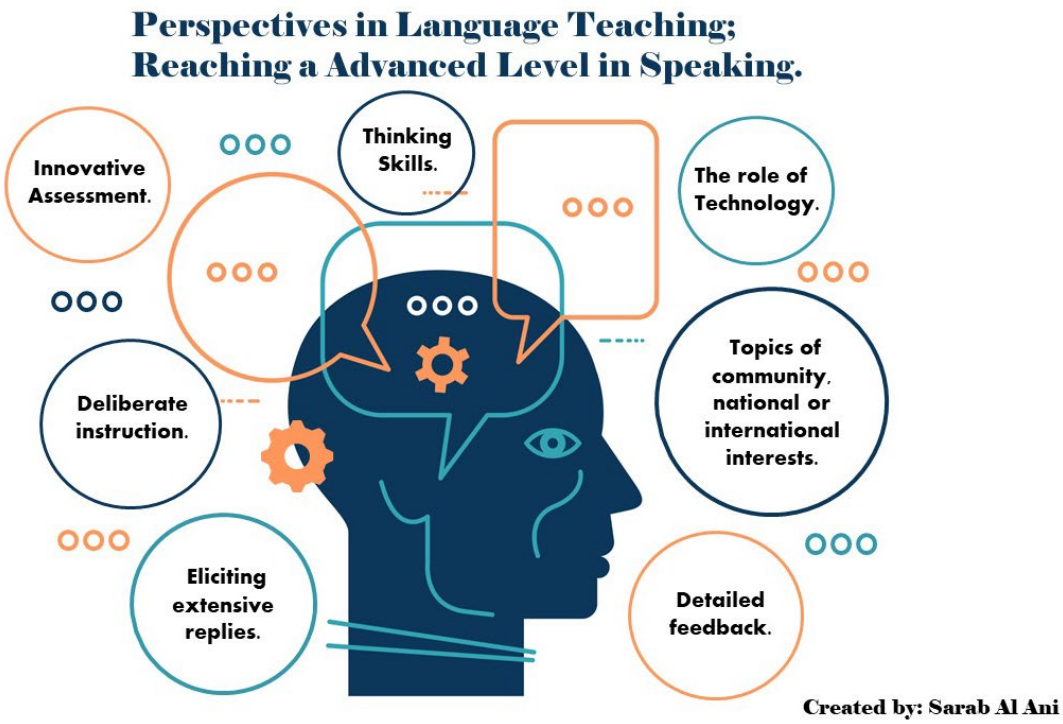
Criteria	Feedback
Content	The reply shows good understanding of the readings (specifically the role of the cafes).
Meaning and development	The reply is somewhat thought out. The ideas show some depth and do successfully go beyond a personal level with few related examples and some additional ideas.
Organization	The reply is well organized. It starts with a general overview and then develops a speculation. The speculation is somewhat well explained.
Convention	Rare hesitation. The reply is minimally rushed.
Language	A good variety of sentence structures was used, and all of them were appropriate to the content. Newly learned vocabulary was used accurately and effectively. Some grammatical errors specifically XYZ.

Finally, the assessment also always included a question of a similar nature. Students reply to the assessment questions orally and record the reply during testing time. After having practiced during class discussions and via practice questions on VoiceThread, students become familiar with the type of reply that is expected of them and know to reply in a detailed and extended manner, mention examples and supporting reasons, tackle the topic from a national (or international) perspective, etc.

It is crucial to mention here that most of the time this question format (in class discussions, practice questions via VoiceThread, and assessment) is not something that our students are used to. They are more accustomed to traditional question formats that involve little oral production (Purpura, 2016) (this excludes oral presentations, creating videos, creating recordings, etc.). Therefore, it is important to spend a good amount of time familiarizing students with these types of assessment questions starting with the technology tool that will be used to deliver the reply, the expected reply, and ways to produce a successful response.

Witnessing students' progress is the most satisfying result of using the steps mentioned above. I am not just referring to the ways their language skill and ability improves week after week, but also to the way they consider these topics (such as gender equality, or the relation between language and identity). Following these steps in teaching builds critical thinkers along with all the other language skills they are developing that semester. Students grow to expect questions that will throw them a curve ball because it requires them to think on their toes, consider what they have learned, what they know, present it from a new perspective, and then solve the problem that is presented in the question. In an age where genuine and true language production is jeopardized by the invasion of AI, this is surefire proof of authenticity.

Finally, the most rewarding aspect of teaching lies in students' intellectual growth. They not only refine their language skills but also develop a deeper understanding of complex social and cultural issues. By encouraging critical thinking and independent analysis, having students tackle these questions prepares students to navigate a world increasingly shaped by information and technology. They learn to question assumptions, evaluate evidence, and construct original arguments.



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