The Impact of the Oral Proficiency Interview on One Foreign Language Teacher Education Program

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Abstract: The Oral Proficiency Interview (OPI) has been increasingly used in academia. However, while multiple studies have documented the growth in OPI implementation across the United States and the proficiency rates of its completers, few have focused specifically on foreign language teacher candidates, and even fewer have investigated the impact that this proficiency assessment may have on language teacher training programs. To better understand the impact of the OPI on foreign language teacher education programs and help guide programmatic decision making, a case study was conducted of one such program that recently implemented the OPI as part of its licensure requirements. The results confirmed earlier research with respect to expected proficiency outcomes of foreign language teacher candidates. The results also suggested that the OPI requirement did not negatively affect program enrollment, nor did teacher trainees negatively perceive the OPI requirement. Finally, the study provided evidence of the positive impact the OPI may have on a foreign language teacher education program. Recommended practices for implementing the OPI in teacher training programs and ways to support foreign language teacher candidates who must complete the assessment are discussed.

Key words: case study, foreign/second language teacher preparation, language proficiency, native speaker/nonnative speaker status, teacher characteristics

Introduction

The Oral Proficiency Interview (OPI) is a nationally recognized, standardized test that assesses an individual’s oral communication skills in a foreign or target language. The OPI was developed in the 1980s by ACTFL and is administered through ACTFL’s official testing office, Language Testing International (LTI). The OPI is offered as an in-person or telephonic interview between the test taker and
either a certified ACTFL tester who has undergone rigorous training in the evaluation process or a computer with which interviewees interact with a digital avatar (Oral Proficiency Interview by Computer; OPIc). Regardless of the means of testing, a recording of the interview is analyzed by two certified ACTFL raters who independently assess the candidate’s speaking proficiency based on the descriptors in the ACTFL Proficiency Guidelines (ACTFL, 2012), resulting in 1 of 11 proficiency level ratings ranging from Novice Low to Distinguished. While approximately 3,000 individuals completed the OPI in 1996, 27,875 OPIs or OPIcs were administered in 2011, and in 2012, that number surpassed 30,000.1

Although individuals take the OPI or OPIc for a variety of different purposes, it is being used in increasing numbers in academia for teacher certification purposes (Hammadou Sullivan, 2011; Malone & Montee, 2010). Currently, 23 states require aspiring foreign language teachers to complete an OPI. Sixteen of these states have adopted the ACTFL standard of Advanced Low or higher for teacher licensure in more commonly taught languages such as Spanish, French, and German, and the remaining seven have set the minimum standard at Intermediate High. With respect to less commonly taught languages, all 23 states require a minimum score of Intermediate High.

In addition to foreign language teacher certification programs in these 23 states, programs seeking national recognition by ACTFL and the Council for the Accreditation of Educator Preparation3 must also demonstrate that their teacher candidates achieve a minimum passing score on the OPI of Advanced Low for commonly taught languages and Intermediate High for less commonly taught languages (Pearson, Fonseca-Greber, & Foell, 2006). Programs whose teacher candidates do not meet this minimum score as outlined in Standard 1a of the ACTFL Program Standards for the Preparation of Foreign Language Teachers (ACTFL, 2002) must offer planned remediation experiences in order to help those candidates enhance their target language speaking skills. This national accreditation requirement has further contributed to the growing number of test takers: As of spring 2013, there were 242 foreign language teacher education programs in 119 institutions of higher education across 27 states and the District of Columbia that included the OPI as part of their licensure requirements (NCATE, 2013).

While these licensing requirements are now well established and have been widely implemented throughout the United States, little research has been conducted on the impact of the OPI requirement on foreign language teacher education programs (Chambless, 2012; Glisan, Swender, & Surface, 2013). In light of Hammadou Sullivan’s (2011) assertion that “the quality of teacher education programs is strongly tied to candidates’ test scores” (p. 254), program directors of foreign language teacher education programs considering adoption of the OPI may, for instance, be interested in knowing what percentage of candidates they might expect to achieve Advanced Low. Further, they may question how implementation of this requirement will be perceived by teacher candidates and what effect it may have on enrollment. For example, might aspiring foreign language teachers balk at the additional fee and added stress of taking this high-stakes test and instead opt for an alternative licensure program that has less demanding requirements or a traditional program that is not seeking national recognition? To better understand the impact of the OPI on foreign language teacher education programs, and therefore help guide programmatic decision making, a case study was conducted of one foreign language teacher education program that had in recent years implemented the OPI as part of its licensure requirements.

**Literature Review**

Analysis of the existing body of research on the OPI revealed three main topics: criticisms of the test, reported trends in
test taker scores, and the impact of the OPI on foreign language teaching.

Criticisms
Many studies have addressed the reliability and validity of the OPI (Chalhoub-Deville & Fulcher, 2003; Liskin-Gasparro, 2003; Malone, 2003; Malone & Montee, 2010). Reliability refers to a test’s ability to produce consistent results (Bachman, 1990). Because the OPI is administered by different people and with different candidates, its interrater reliability has been questioned. Thompson (1995) examined the interrater reliability of 795 OPIs in five different languages. While her results indicated high correlations between ratings assigned by different testers, she found that initial interviewers tended to rate candidates higher than the second reviewers of the same interview and that there were frequent disagreements among raters across sublevels. Bachman (1990) added that, because the topics and questions asked in OPIs are not standardized, there is the potential for low levels of interrater reliability. However, in response to these and similar concerns, by 1999 all OPI raters had been retrained, and testers are now routinely monitored for reliability (Malone & Montee, 2010).

In addition to reliability concerns, several researchers have called into question the validity of the OPI. Validity refers to the extent to which a test measures what it is intended to measure. One frequent criticism is directed at the ACTFL Proficiency Guidelines (ACTFL, 2012) upon which the OPI is based. Fulcher (1996) argued that the guidelines were developed based on teachers’ experiences rather than on documented and analyzed empirical evidence (Malone & Montee, 2010). The type of language that is elicited during the OPI has also led to concerns about the validity of the assessment. Critics have argued that while the OPI is intended to assess interpersonal language performance in a variety of real-world tasks, it may more accurately assess a candidate’s ability to actively participate in a formal interview (Liskin-Gasparro, 2003), particularly at the upper levels of proficiency, or in the case of the OPIc, to engage in more purely presentational communication. In addition, language educators have pointed out that a candidate’s rating on the OPI or the OPIc may be in part determined by his or her ability to understand what is being said by the interviewer or avatar, thus making it difficult for a rater to separate and rate proficiency in the interpretive mode from proficiency in the interpersonal or presentational modes. Other researchers, however, have argued that the benefits of the OPI outweigh its validity concerns. Van Lier argued that the OPI has face validity, in the sense that it is perceived by testers and test takers to assess communicative proficiency, and that it is “possible to sidestep the issue of construct validity altogether and be satisfied with measuring whatever oral language use happens to be elicited by the OPI, since it is in any case the best instrument available” (1989, p. 501). Furthermore, Chapelle, Enright, and Jamieson (1998) argued that no test can be completely valid in all contexts and applications.

Oral Proficiency of Teacher Candidates
While standards for foreign language teacher preparation at the national level have established the Advanced Low rating requirement for more commonly taught languages and Intermediate High for less commonly taught languages, numerous studies have demonstrated that this rating is not easily attained. A study by Swender (2003) analyzed the official OPI ratings conducted for 501 undergraduate foreign language majors at five American universities in seven different languages. The researcher found that less than half of the test completers (47%) were able to reach Advanced Low. The researcher noted that, while many of the test completers had participated in a study abroad program, few were native speakers of the language. The presence of native speakers of the foreign language was
mentioned in a large-scale study by Swender, Surface, and Hamlyn (2007) that reported slightly higher results. In that study, 59.5% of the teacher candidates achieved the ACTFL requirement of Advanced Low (information available in Glisan et al., 2013, p. 70). More recent research has continued to demonstrate that approximately half of foreign language teacher candidates are able to successfully reach oral proficiency expectations determined by the ACTFL. Ball (2010) surveyed and interviewed foreign language teacher education faculty and other faculty in foreign language departments at four colleges and universities in Ohio and found that about half of the teacher candidates’ oral communication skills were rated at the Intermediate High level. Results of the largest and most recent study to date further reflected this national trend: Glisan et al. (2013) analyzed the OPI results of 2,881 foreign language teacher candidates of 11 different languages and found that 54.8% of the test takers met the ACTFL proficiency standard in their language (p. 276).

Washback
Several studies have looked at the potential “washback” of OPI testing on foreign language instruction—that is, the effect the OPI has on instruction (Malone & Montee, 2010). The development of the ACTFL proficiency guidelines and the OPI has been reported by some to be the impetus behind the proficiency movement in the United States (Mitchell & Vidal, 2001). The proficiency movement, in turn, has been associated with steady increases in ACTFL membership, in the number of OPI familiarization and certification workshops, and in proficiency-oriented publications, as well as the development of the National Standards for Foreign Language Learning in the 21st Century (2006) and the ACTFL-NCSSFL Can-Do statements (National Council of State Supervisors for Languages). The OPI has also been reported to have changed the face of language testing. With its emphasis on productive skills and communicative competence, more and more foreign language teachers around the country no longer focus solely on grammatical accuracy or mastery of vocabulary when assessing their students. The development of the OPI has also spawned numerous research studies whose findings have practical implications for foreign language teachers and learners. Liskin-Gasparro (2003) stated, “Examinations of OPI discourse have contributed to the growing body of research about such topics as the nature of language that is produced in face-to-face and semi-direct oral tests” (p. 488). Malone and Montee (2010) added that “the principles gained through [OPI] training and testing can have positive washback at the classroom level” (p. 979).

Need for Research
There is little doubt that the ACTFL proficiency guidelines and the OPI have influenced foreign language teaching in the United States. Chalhoub-Deville and Fulcher (2003) commented, “[r]esearchers and practitioners would undoubtedly acknowledge that in the past two decades the ACTFL products have influenced or perhaps even shaped foreign language instruction in the United States” (p. 504). That said, there has been a call in recent years for greater investigation of the impact of ACTFL products and requirements, such as the OPI, across a range of contexts. Malone and Montee (2010), for example, questioned the feasibility of the OPI for teacher education programs. The need for greater research surrounding the OPI is also reflected in Phase II of the ACTFL Research Priorities initiative (ACTFL, 2013), and the need for further research is particularly acute in foreign language teacher education. While published data related to the speaking proficiency of college foreign language majors (Swender, 2003) do exist, many of the reported studies did not differentiate between language majors who are seeking teacher certification and those who are not. Further, related studies rarely addressed the needs and requirements of “lateral entry” foreign
language teachers—that is, those who are currently teaching in foreign language classrooms despite not yet having obtained their teaching license requirements in the language. In addition, although multiple studies have commented upon the positive washback related to the development and implementation of the OPI, very few have looked into the negative implications that this assessment may have on foreign language teacher education programs and their teacher candidates. In a study investigating how 734 teacher candidates prepared for the OPI, Hammadou Sullivan (2011) reported that the OPI was a cause of stress among many candidates. Ball (2010, p. 1) reported that failing to meet the required level of proficiency on the OPI was “a gut-wrenching problem” for foreign language teacher candidates and that many protested this requirement. As recently as 2011, it was acknowledged that there has been “some pushback from colleges and universities” in regard to the Advanced Low OPI requirement (Mondloch, 2011, p. 601).

To address the limited research on these issues, a case study was conducted to investigate the impact of the OPI requirement on one foreign language teacher education program. According to Stake (1995), case studies serve the valuable purpose of describing, analyzing, and representing the complexity of a single case, from which broadly generalizable conclusions can be drawn. In language education, case studies often examine a specific language program, or in this case, a specific language teacher education program (see Johnson, 1992). More specifically, through analysis of archival OPI results, program enrollment patterns, and survey and interview data, this case study sought answers to the following questions:

1. What percentage of teacher candidates were able to meet the ACTFL oral proficiency standard of Advanced Low in German, French, or Spanish?
2. To what extent did implementation of the OPI requirement affect program enrollment?
3. How was the assessment perceived by teacher candidates who have taken but not necessarily passed it?
4. To what extent has implementation of the OPI influenced the way in which the foreign language teacher certification program is configured and delivered?

Method

Participants

The study considered data generated from one foreign language teacher education program in the southeastern United States. This graduate certificate program was designed for aspiring K–12 teachers of French, German, or Spanish. To be eligible, candidates had to have successfully completed a bachelor’s degree and demonstrated adequate background knowledge in their area of intended licensure. This can be accomplished in one of three ways: (1) have a major in the foreign language; (2) complete the equivalent of a major, defined as successful completion of a minimum of 24 credit hours of instruction in the foreign language, with at least six hours being in advanced-level courses; and (3) be a native speaker of the language and pass a state content exam (Praxis II). The program consisted of a sequence of seven graduate-level courses, including two foreign language methodology courses and a full-time, semester-long student-teaching internship in a K–12 foreign language classroom. To ensure that all teacher candidates in the program had the necessary skills in the language to be effective and to better align with standards for nationally recognized foreign language teacher education programs (ACTFL, 2002), the program required that all candidates who were accepted after January 1, 2010, complete the OPI prior to beginning the culminating student-teaching semester. Aligning with ACTFL standards, the target score was set at Advanced Low.

Since the graduate program imposed this requirement, a total of 41 teacher candidates have taken the OPI. Of these candidates, 32 (78%) were pursuing a license to
teach Spanish, eight (19%) were aspiring French teachers, and one sought certification in German. Twenty (49%) of the candidates were practicing, lateral-entry teachers. Fifteen (37%) reported being native speakers of the language. Of the 26 nonnative speakers, 21 (81%) reported having studied abroad. Only eight (20%) of the participants were male.

Procedures and Instrumentation
Both quantitative and qualitative data were gathered to analyze trends in enrollment and test scores and to gain the perspectives of individual teacher candidates as well as those of the program director.

OPI
To determine candidates’ proficiency, they were required to complete the OPIc, which was chosen due to its convenience and cost-effectiveness. Each OPIc was conducted in a large language lab and proctored by the director of the program. Results were shared with each candidate individually. Candidates who obtained a score of Advanced Low or better were accepted into student-teaching. Those whose score fell one level below Advanced Low (Intermediate High) were admitted to student-teaching but were also required to develop an action plan that was approved by the program director and that detailed the steps that they would take to enhance their oral communication skills in the foreign language and to carry out that plan, either prior to or during student-teaching. These steps often included taking additional coursework in the language, study abroad, and/or volunteer work at a local community support agency where they would have frequent opportunities to hone their oral communication skills. Candidates who received a score of Intermediate Mid or lower were required to wait a minimum of 90 days before being allowed to retake the OPI and were not allowed to student-teach.

Archival Data
To compare enrollment trends across multiple programs before and after implementation of the OPI in 2010, and thus explore the possible impact of the OPI requirement on enrollment patterns, archival enrollment data from the fall 2007 through spring 2014 semesters were obtained from five different graduate certificate programs at the participating university: Foreign Language Education (FLED), Teaching English as a Second Language (TESL), Elementary Education (ELED), Child and Family Development (CHFD), and Middle Grades Math (MDLG-Math).

Survey
Upon receipt of their OPI score, candidates were asked to complete a brief online survey. All 41 teacher candidates (100%) who had taken the OPI since its implementation in 2010 completed the survey (see Appendix). The survey was designed to gather demographic information and to better understand how the teacher candidates perceived the OPI requirement. Specifically, candidates were asked to describe the impact the requirement had on their decision to enroll in the teacher training program, the drawbacks of the assessment, whether they felt it was a necessary component of their teacher training program, and what could have been done to better prepare them to successfully complete it.

Interview
A semi-structured interview was conducted with the director of the graduate certificate program to explore the extent to which implementation of the OPI had influenced program delivery. During the interview, the director was asked to describe the impact that the implementation of the OPI had on the program, the advantages and disadvantages of the requirement, and what had been done to better prepare the teacher candidates. The 15-minute interview was audio-recorded and transcribed.

Data Analysis
Official OPIc scores for the 41 teacher candidates were obtained from LTI. Ratings
were analyzed for the total group, as well as based on language of instruction and status as a native or nonnative speaker. To investigate the extent to which implementation of the OPI requirement impacted enrollment in the FLED program, enrollment trends from 2007 to 2014 in the five previously mentioned initial licensure programs were also analyzed. It was reasoned that although numerous factors, such as economic climate, teacher pay, and government mandates, might influence enrollment in teacher education, these factors would apply similarly to all programs, whereas the OPI requirement applied solely to the FLED program. The hypothesis was that if the OPI requirement discouraged prospective teacher candidates from enrolling in the FLED program, a greater decrease in enrollment would be seen in that program following the implementation of the OPI requirement than would be seen in the other four programs for which requirements remained unchanged.

A grounded theory approach (Glaser, 1992) was used to analyze the qualitative data obtained from the survey and interview in order to detect emerging themes. Following the principles outlined by Emerson, Fretz, and Shaw (1995) for collecting and analyzing qualitative data, participants’ responses were transcribed and grouped according to question asked. Next, the responses in each group were analyzed line by line and coded using the comment function in Microsoft Word to identify recurrent themes. These themes were then compressed into broader categories.

**Results**

**Performance on the OPI**

As demonstrated in Table 1, of the 41 teacher candidates, 23 (56%) obtained a score of Advanced Low or higher. The remaining 18 candidates scored Intermediate High. It should be noted that two test takers, both of whom were nonnative speakers of the target language and had not participated in a study abroad experience, were required to take the test twice. Both of these Spanish teacher candidates initially received a score of Intermediate Mid. Disappointed and confident that they could do better, they waited the required 90 days, took the test again, and reached a score of Intermediate High.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Group</th>
<th>Intermediate Mid</th>
<th>Intermediate High</th>
<th>Advanced Low</th>
<th>Advanced Mid or Higher</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Native Speaker/Lateral Entry Teacher</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Native Speaker/Regular Entry Teacher</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nonnative Speaker/Lateral Entry Teacher</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nonnative Speaker/Regular Entry Teacher</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total candidates</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: Both candidates who scored Intermediate Mid retook the test at a later date and scored Intermediate High.
As was to be expected, all of the 15 native speakers met the Advanced Low threshold, compared to only 8 of the 26 nonnative speakers (31%). Among those whose first language was not their intended language of instruction, a study abroad experience appeared to be beneficial. Twenty-one of the 26 nonnative speakers indicated that they had studied abroad for a minimum period of three months. Of these participants, eight (38%) scored Advanced Low or higher. In contrast, none of the five nonnative speakers who did not go abroad were able to attain that level of oral fluency.

When analyzed by intended language of instruction, similar results were found for French and Spanish. Half of the eight aspiring French teachers met the Advanced Low benchmark, compared to 59% of the 32 Spanish teacher candidates. The prospective German teacher was a nonnative speaker but had lived for almost 20 years in Germany and scored at the Superior level.

Finally, comparisons were also drawn based on employment status. Half of the lateral entry teachers were able to meet the Advanced Low threshold on the OPI. This percentage was slightly less than what was reported for the whole group (56%).

**Program Enrollment**

As illustrated in Figure 1, implementation of the OPI requirement in January 2010 did not appear to adversely affect enrollment in the FLED program. Although they are larger than the FLED program, the ELED and MDLG-Math programs experienced impressive growth in 2008–2009 followed by dramatic decreases in 2010. Enrollment in the FLED program, on the other hand, reflected relatively slow but steady growth since 2007. When analysis focused specifically on the period between the final semester before implementation of the OPI requirement (fall 2009) and the conclusion of the data-gathering period for this study (spring 2014), the positive enrollment trends in the FLED program became even more apparent. While enrollment in ELED (−37%), CHFD (−30%), and MDLG-Math (−33%) all experienced similarly large decreases in enrollment during this time period, enrollment in FLED expanded by more than 18%.

Qualitative data from the survey further suggested that implementation of the OPI requirement did little to deter enrollment. When directly asked in the survey to describe the impact of the OPI requirement on their decision to enroll in the program,
39 of the 41 candidates (95%) responded with such comments as, “zero impact,” “none,” and “it didn’t have any impact.” Seven of the 15 native speakers (47%) added that they were very confident in their language skills and saw the OPI simply as one additional requirement. Even among nonnative speakers, there appeared to be little angst. When asked how the OPI requirement affected her decision to enroll, one nonnative speaker candidate stated, “None; if I had not passed this time around, I would have simply taken it again, and then taken the internship the following semester.” Only two teacher candidates, both native speakers of English, mentioned that they were intimidated by the test. One mentioned that the requirement “made perfect sense,” while the other acknowledged that it did weigh on her mind when she was deciding to pursue her license. The latter, who scored Intermediate High, added:

[The OPI requirement] was added the very semester that I began my studies. I almost withdrew from the program when I realized that I was going to have to pass this test before I was allowed to get my licensure, because I was using my undergraduate French degree from 25 years ago. I had a steep hill to climb.

It was interesting to note that 5 of the 41 candidates (12%) stated that they were not aware of the OPI requirement until after they had already been accepted into the program.

Teacher Candidate Perceptions
Support for the Assessment
As demonstrated in Table 2, all but 2 of the 41 teacher candidates supported the inclusion of the OPI requirement. The most common reason provided was that for teachers to develop proficiency among their students, they too must be proficient in the language, particularly because teachers are expected to use the target language 90% of the time in the classroom and thus must have advanced fluency. In total, 33 of the 41 participants (80%) made some reference in their survey response to the need for foreign language teachers to possess sufficient skills that they can easily conduct class in the target language and develop proficiency among their students. The necessity for some form of oral proficiency assessment in the language was underscored by the following comment from a practicing French teacher who was never asked to demonstrate her proficiency in the language before being hired: “This was honestly the first time I have been assessed on my spoken skills. Even in my interview to get my current position as a high school French teacher, I was only asked to speak a few basic sentences.” Four of the candidates commented that the OPI raised their awareness of their own limitations and provided guidance in regard to what they needed to improve. In the words of a nonnative speaker of Spanish, “I think that it is beneficial to those of us that need to know where we are in the language to perhaps make us realize what we need to work on.” Even among those who were apprehensive about completing the test and reaching Advanced Low, there was an expressed understanding of why this requirement was in place. An aspiring French teacher commented, “I understand that there is a need to assess fluency in order to ensure quality of teachers and to protect the integrity of the program. That said, this was easily the most intimidating component of my studies.”

Drawbacks
While the majority of participants perceived implementation of the OPI in a favorable manner, five (12%) reported experiencing anxiety with taking the test. Five additional participants reported that the test was redundant and an unnecessary cost for native speakers and lateral entry teachers. It was mentioned that both of these groups had already been required to pay to complete the Praxis II content test in order to gain admission to the program or prior to being hired by their school district. One lateral
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theme</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
<th>Sample Comment</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>No impact on decision to enroll</td>
<td>39/41</td>
<td>The OPIc did not influence my decision to enroll in the teaching program. I just saw it as a part of my program requirements.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Confidence among native speakers</td>
<td>7/15</td>
<td>I studied my whole life in the French system. For me the OPI was not a big deal.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unaware of requirement</td>
<td>5/41</td>
<td>It had no impact on my decision to enroll because I was already enrolled in the program when I found out it was a requirement.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Proficiency-oriented</td>
<td>33/41</td>
<td>I feel that this is a necessary component of the foreign language teacher education program so that students may prove a certain level of proficiency in the language before being able to teach it. Students who may not have experienced a study abroad may find this type of exam difficult because of lack of experience with native speakers. However, I do feel that it is essential for future foreign language teachers to complete an OPI to show they have a minimal amount of proficiency before entering a foreign language classroom. I especially think this is true today since classes now are looking at 90% of the time the teacher should be using the target language. This has become the standard and is conducive to learning the foreign language by hearing the foreign language.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Raised self-awareness</td>
<td>4/41</td>
<td>I think that the OPIc also shows you where you stand according to someone else, and in my case it helps me work harder and smarter to improve myself.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Redundancy</td>
<td>5/41</td>
<td>I understand it is necessary for a nonnative of the language to make sure that they are more advanced in the language than their potential students. I do not see the point for a native speaker.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Anxiety</td>
<td>5/41</td>
<td>I think that it causes anxiety because if you do not pass it you are unable to continue in your effort to receive a license.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nature of questions asked</td>
<td>9/41</td>
<td>I think one of the major drawbacks is that the topics you choose are not predictive of what is asked of you. For example, I was asked many questions about a topic that only vaguely had to do with one of the topics I checked. At times, I felt that I was being tested not on my speaking abilities, but rather my knowledge of current events. I felt that I didn’t have enough time to gather my thoughts for a thorough response to questions like these.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
entry Spanish teacher effectively summarized these concerns: “I think that it causes anxiety because if you do not pass, you are unable to continue. I also think that it is repetitive that you have to take the OPI even if you’ve already passed the Praxis II.”

Nine out of 41 participants (22%) reported concerns specifically about the questions posed by the avatar that guides the OPI; although all candidates completed an online survey soliciting information about their interests and hobbies, several candidates stated that the questions posed by the avatar were unrelated to those stated interests and, as a result, they struggled to respond. A lateral entry teacher stated, “I struggled with the content of some of the questions, not necessarily the Spanish required to express my answers.” In addition, seven candidates (17%) expressed concern about the overall OPIc experience: One candidate noted that “talking to a computer is different than talking to a real person” and that the comfort level and flow of conversation was not natural. Similar to previously published critiques (Liskin-Gasparro, 2003), three candidates said the interaction between candidate and computer resembled a formal interview rather than a true conversation. It is important to note, however, that not all descriptions of the online format of the OPI were negative. A native speaker of French who exceeded the Advanced Low benchmark stated, “There are no drawbacks. It is offered at the university, so conveniently located. The cost was low. It is simple to operate technically, and it is a good measure of skills.”

Note: The number 41 refers to the number of participants who completed the OPI; the number 15 refers to the number of native speakers who participated.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theme</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
<th>Sample Comment</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Artificial online experience</td>
<td>7/41</td>
<td>It is difficult to talk to a computer and have a conversation. Not very realistic and can be more awkward than a real conversation.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mock OPI training sessions</td>
<td>16/41</td>
<td>I felt much better after seeing the English demo of the OPIc. I don’t know if there is any way to make some form of that available to people earlier, but that might help people know how to practice some potential responses to the types of questions they will encounter.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Language practice in coursework</td>
<td>6/41</td>
<td>I believe that not necessarily the foreign language teacher education program, but rather the Spanish program, could have prepared me and other Spanish majors for this test by providing more opportunities for communication in the foreign language during class. Classes in the upper levels designed specifically for speaking would have helped a great deal.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Study abroad</td>
<td>5/41</td>
<td>It also comes down to experience and whether or not a student has completed a study abroad and/or had interaction with native speakers of the language.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

TABLE 2 Continued

Note: The number 41 refers to the number of participants who completed the OPI; the number 15 refers to the number of native speakers who participated.
Suggestions for Improvement
Although the majority of participants supported the OPI requirement, they felt that steps could be taken to enhance candidates’ chances for success. The most common recommendation involved mock OPI training sessions. Sixteen of the 41 participants (39%) felt that offering OPI practice sessions would be helpful in familiarizing candidates with the format of the test as well as the types of questions asked, and would also provide an opportunity to practice interacting in the target language. An aspiring Spanish teacher who scored Intermediate High commented:

I think that it would be helpful to have a mock OPI where the students could log onto a site and answer prerecorded questions to help acclimate them with the system. I think this would cut down on nerves and help familiarize [candidates] with what they should expect.

Others reported that more could be done in their graduate-level language coursework to better prepare them to take the OPI. Comments from six participants (15%) suggested that upper-level language classrooms tended to be lecture-style, where students had little opportunity to interact and thus hone their oral communication skills. An aspiring Spanish teacher made the following remark:

I believe that not necessarily the foreign language teacher education program, but rather the Spanish program could have prepared me and other Spanish majors for this test by providing more opportunities for communication in the target language during class. Classes in the upper levels designed specifically for speaking in the language would have helped a great deal.

While no candidate made the recommendation that experience abroad or in a local community setting where the target language was used should be mandated in foreign language teacher training programs, 5 of the 26 nonnative speakers (19%) did mention that their time abroad was beneficial and played an important role in preparing them for the OPIc. A lateral entry teacher and nonnative speaker of Spanish reported that her time abroad was instrumental in helping her to attain an OPI rating of Advanced Mid. She explained, “I don’t think anything could have prepared me more. I was happy with my score and feel that my education and time abroad helped me with the speaking and listening that the OPI required.”

Program Delivery
Interview data from the FLED program director suggested that the impact of the OPI requirement on this foreign language teacher certification program had been positive and that it had encouraged greater collaboration between the teacher education program in the participating institution’s College of Education and colleagues in the Languages and Culture Studies Department. He explained:

There is often a disconnect between the education and the foreign language faculty. The OPI requirement has caused us to work more closely together. Almost half of my students were not reaching Advanced Low, so I approached my colleagues in Languages and Culture Studies to discuss what we can do to address this.

According to the director, as a result of such collaboration an advanced language course was added to the required course sequence for all FLED teacher candidates. Prior to this requirement, all courses in the program were pedagogy based and did little to enhance target language skills. Furthermore, as part of this advanced content course, and in order to be accepted into student-teaching, teacher candidates were required to complete a 12- to 15-page scholarly paper that had to be evaluated by the instructor at the proficient or accomplished level in all areas of the rubric. The director stated that while this new course and high-stakes
assignment did not guarantee advanced oral communication skills among teacher candidates, it did help ensure that all FLED student-teachers had in-depth knowledge of the target language prior to beginning their internship. He added, “Since adding the OPI and this new assignment, I haven’t had a single complaint from a supervising teacher that one of my students did not have the necessary language skills. That was not the case before.”

Interdisciplinary collaboration to enhance teacher candidates’ foreign language skills also involved the university’s Office of International Programs (OIP). The director of the FLED program explained that efforts had been made to increase the number of candidates who participated in study abroad opportunities. As part of this effort, OIP staff made annual presentations to foreign language teacher candidates to discuss study abroad programs, grant opportunities, and experiences from previous study abroad participants. The benefits of these presentations were beginning to be felt. He commented, “This past year, I had two students apply for and receive grants to study abroad. One is going to Germany, and the other Chile.”

While the above-mentioned collaboration was helpful, the director acknowledged that there were also limitations. He mentioned that many of the candidates who needed to enhance their foreign language skills were already teaching and therefore unable to participate in a study abroad during the school year. He also reported that the short-term nature of his graduate certificate program made improving candidates’ skills somewhat challenging:

Many of my students complete the program in a year and a half. That doesn’t give much time for improvement. It also makes it hard to assess their oral skills at multiple points across the program. They already take the OPI near the end of the program. Many of them take the PRAXIS II to get into the program. Am I going to add a third oral assessment in an 18-month program? That’s a lot, and there are costs to consider as well.

The director was specifically asked how he handled candidates who failed to meet the OPI expectation and thus could not continue in the program. He responded, “Yes, this was my biggest concern, but it has really only happened twice, and in both cases those students were disappointed, but they knew that their skills weren’t up to par and that they had to improve.” He added that both of these students took a semester off to work on their language skills, had since retaken the OPIc, and had improved their score to the point where they were able to continue in the program. The director also explained that a score of Intermediate High does not necessarily mean that a teacher candidate has to withdraw from the program:

The national standards require that programs use an official version of the OPI, that the expectation be set at Advanced Low, and that data be collected on how candidates perform on the test. It’s up to the program to decide what course of action to take with those who don’t attain that level. As long as they can show that they are using the data to improve the program that is fine. If some candidates don’t reach [Advanced Low], they can talk about what factors resulted in that rate and how they want to help future candidates reach that level. In my case, I have taken the data and added advanced language coursework. I also require candidates who fall just short of Advanced Low to develop and implement a remediation plan.

According to the director, the remediation plans typically involved additional coursework, studying abroad, watching movies and television shows in the target language, listening to foreign language radio stations, reading books in the language, and spending time at various community-based or international organizations where candidates could converse with native speakers.
Discussion

Approximately 70% of the 26 nonnative speaking teacher candidates in this study did not meet proficiency standards established by ACTFL for teacher education programs. Two initially received a score of Intermediate Mid, and one of these two candidates was a practicing foreign language teacher. These current and aspiring teachers had studied the language for many years and in most cases had an undergraduate degree major in the language. However, despite their extended studies, they were unable to meet the Advanced Low threshold on the OPIc. This troubling fact clearly speaks to the need to fundamentally change how postsecondary language departments are preparing their students for future careers in a global and multilingual society. Whether one pursues a career in teaching, health care, international business, diplomacy, social services, law enforcement, or other endeavors, the ability to communicate proficiently in a language other than English is no longer a luxury—it is a necessity. The following words, from a nonnative-speaking aspiring Spanish teacher, speak volumes: “Considering the number of classes we have taken, if we’re not proficient by the time we student-teach, our language professors have failed.”

The proficiency-based movement that has been so openly embraced by K–12 language programs in the United States should be extended to postsecondary studies, replacing the lecture-based, teacher-centered instruction that was described by six teacher candidates in this study and is likely still commonplace in many postsecondary settings. As noted by the MLA (2007), the traditional literature-based curriculum that is commonly found in university language departments may provide cultural insights and hone interpretive reading and presentation writing skills, but it does not adequately prepare students to enter the 21st-century workforce, where they are required to communicate, collaborate, and problem solve as members of a truly multicultural and multilingual society. The proficiency-oriented tools and resources, such as Linguafolio, Can-Do statements, Integrated Performance Assessments, and the ACTFL performance rubrics that increasingly guide K–12 curriculum and instruction should not be abandoned at the gates of postsecondary institutions. On the contrary, they should be extended in clearly articulated, proficiency-based programs that make high levels of proficiency the goal for all learners.

In addition to changing the curriculum and methods of delivery at the postsecondary level, study abroad offers another important way of promoting both oral proficiency and cultural competence among postsecondary students. While a rich body of research has demonstrated that study abroad alone cannot guarantee advanced oral proficiency in the target language (Swender, 2003), postsecondary institutions are increasingly seeking to internationalize their programs and thus to better prepare their students for the global workforce. In an era where study abroad opportunities are becoming commonplace across a myriad of postsecondary programs outside of language studies, participation in such activities must be the expectation in foreign language programs. While some faculty may suggest that such a requirement may be viewed by students as an added burden and thus may negatively impact enrollment, this researcher’s experience suggests that, once study abroad programs become firmly established, students accept them as an additional program requirement. In fact, in spite of implementing a requirement several years ago that all students majoring in Japanese spend a semester in Japan, enrollment in the Japanese program at the university under consideration in this article has continued to grow. Indeed, instead of viewing study abroad as a deterrent to enrollment, language educators should consider it as a recruitment strategy, as prospective students may be lured by the opportunity to spend time in exotic locales in Europe, South America, Africa, or Asia.

Given that study abroad may not always be feasible for all candidates, language
departments also need to find alternative ways to expose students to native speakers of the target language. For example, Skype and Google Hangout, two free online resources, could be integrated into postsecondary language classroom sessions and out-of-class assignments to allow for live interaction with native speakers of the target language. There are also numerous Web sites, e.g., YouTube and a site at the University of Texas at Austin (http://laits.utexas.edu/spe/index.html), that offer authentic video clips in a foreign language in which native speakers from various locations demonstrate language tasks in real-world, meaningful contexts.

Language resource centers and on-campus centers for international students can also help connect students to native speakers of languages other than English by scheduling conversation partners, meet-up groups, international coffee hours, guest lectures, and the presentation of foreign films. At a time when students have their own personal devices to access the Internet, there is no longer a need for the traditional language lab; thus, such lab spaces can be transformed into places where students can mingle with other foreign language learners, communicate with native speakers, and be exposed to authentic cultural resources, such as newspapers, magazines, and films, in a warm and inviting environment. This message was underscored by a nonnative speaker of Spanish who scored Intermediate High on the OPI. When asked what could have been done to further prepare her for the test, she commented:

Maybe offer more support as far as preparation, such as letting us know a cultural program or events that would allow us to practice the language or online resources for practice. In my undergrad [program], there was a language house and students met once a week to chat and watch movies in Spanish. I had to seek ways to practice and prepare on my own.

Service learning opportunities offer yet another possible means of promoting communicative competence among nonnative speakers. As cities and even small towns across the United States become more linguistically and culturally diverse, the opportunities to expose students to native speakers of a target language also increase. Students in advanced Spanish language courses could, e.g., be required to volunteer for a specified number of hours at an organization supporting the Latino community; volunteer to teach English to recent immigrants; assist teachers in the growing number of K–12 dual language and immersion schools; or serve as volunteer interpreters at clinics, food banks, churches, and government agencies that cater to immigrant populations. Such service-learning extensions of more traditional on-campus coursework not only serve to expose students to speakers of the target language in meaningful contexts, but are also a means of giving back to the community in which students live.

Of course, the responsibility for preparing foreign language teacher candidates extends beyond language departments and certainly includes colleges of education. Data collected in the study suggested the benefits of assessing teacher candidates’ proficiency at multiple points across the teacher training program. While this may be a challenge in short-term, certificate programs, requiring that candidates complete a series of benchmark assessments perhaps using less costly assessments like the ACTFL Assessment of Progress Toward Proficiency (AAPPL) could serve to familiarize candidates with proficiency-based assessment procedures and allow them to obtain a more realistic understanding of their language skills earlier in the program, when there is still time for remediation. Involving foreign language faculty in informally assessing candidate proficiency also offers another low-cost approach: During the interview, the program director mentioned that several faculty members in the Department of Languages and Culture Studies had received OPI training but had let their certification lapse. Unofficial OPI assessments by such faculty early in a foreign language
teacher education program could come at no additional cost to participants and could contribute to faculty members’ service agendas while providing valuable data on learners’ current levels of proficiency and helping learners to practice target language skills and become familiar with assessment procedures.

Completing the OPI only once, and at the end of the program, was too late for several teacher candidates in this study and required two candidates to suspend their studies for an extended period of time while they worked on enhancing their skills. Assessing candidates’ knowledge and skills at several points in the program may be particularly important in graduate certificate programs, which traditionally accept applicants who have an undergraduate degree majoring in the foreign language. While basing program admission on transcripts may be an effective means of determining depth of content knowledge among candidates who very recently completed their undergraduate degree, it is a less reliable measure for others who graduated many years earlier. In the case of one aspiring French teacher in the study, it had been 25 years since she had completed her studies in French. As an entrance requirement, completion of the OPI would have provided all candidates with feedback, as well as time for remediation. Similarly, using proficiency-oriented assessments at the beginning of a program may be useful for graduates from universities in which beginning and intermediate courses may be counted toward the major, thus reducing the number of upper-level courses in which advanced levels of language are developed and perfected.

Limitations and Directions for Future Research
This study investigated the impact of the OPI on one foreign language teacher education program. Studies such as this, by definition, describe the complexities of a single case (Stake, 1995). Because the program under consideration was located in a large urban area with one of the fastest growing Latino populations in the country, the presence of a large number of aspiring Spanish teachers who were native speakers of the language may have inflated the OPI scores. Further, interdepartmental collaboration was facilitated by the program director’s joint position in the education and foreign language departments, as well as the fact that both departments were housed in the same building. Future studies should involve a larger number of programs spread across a wider geographic area, including regions where large numbers of native speakers of the intended language of instruction are not present.

Furthermore, while the study investigated the impact of the OPI on foreign language teacher candidate enrollment and perceptions, it did not address the impact this requirement had on candidates’ classroom performance either on the job or during the student-teaching internship. Future research should compare teacher candidates’ performance outcomes during their internship pre- and post-implementation of the OPI requirement. It would also be important to compare the performance outcomes of candidates who meet the Advanced Low requirement with those who do not. Follow-up studies surveying employers of foreign language teachers whose teacher training programs did or did not implement the OPI requirement represent another interesting direction for future related research.

Conclusion
While multiple studies have documented the growth in OPI implementation and the proficiency rates of OPI completers, few have focused on foreign language teacher candidates or on the skills of practicing, lateral entry teachers. Even fewer studies have investigated the impact of the OPI requirement on foreign language teacher preparation programs. Perhaps the study’s greatest contribution is the evidence that supports the positive impact that the OPI
may have on foreign language teacher candidates' overall skills, as well as on the way in which the teacher education program is designed and delivered. Far from experiencing the “gut-wrenching” problems associated with the Advanced Low OPI requirement described by Ball (2010), both the teacher candidates and the program director in this study were generally, although not uniformly, positive about the change in requirements. While acknowledging that there was still work to be done, the program director reported that the OPI requirement provided the impetus to make programmatic improvements. Such improvements included a greater focus throughout the program of study on developing and assessing learners' proficiency; increasing their exposure to, and interaction with, native speakers using technology, service learning, and study abroad; and monitoring their growing proficiency at multiple benchmark points along the way.

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Notes
1. Information on official ACTFL OPI testing was provided by the ACTFL.
2. Teachers of Japanese, Arabic, Mandarin, and Korean are required to meet or exceed a slightly lower level of oral proficiency (Intermediate High) in order to meet ACTFL standards due to how different these languages are from English and how long it takes to develop proficiency in them.
3. As of January 1, 2013, the National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education (NCATE) was merged with the Teacher Education Accreditation Council (TEAC) to become the Council for the Accreditation of Educator Preparation (CAEP).
4. The National Standards for Foreign Language Learning in the 21st Century (2006) have been recently revised and are now referred to as the World Readiness Standards. An updated version of these standards will be available by November 2014.
5. Lateral entry licenses are provided to teachers who have demonstrated content knowledge in their field and who are hired by school districts but have not completed licensure requirements. A lateral entry license is valid for a three-year period, during which time candidates are expected to complete licensure requirements.
6. A fee of $55 allows completers of the OPIc to receive a maximum rating of Advanced. Candidates hoping to receive a higher, Superior, or Distinguished rating must pay $65.
7. The ACTFL Assessment of Performance Toward Proficiency in Languages (AAPPL) is a convenient and inexpensive online assessment of all three modes of communication. For as little as $10 per test, the AAPPL can measure language skills in Arabic, Chinese, French, German, Russian, Spanish, and English.

References


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APPENDIX

Oral Proficiency Interview

Section A: Background Information

Please indicate your response to the following questions:

1. What is your gender?
   _____ Male  _____ Female

2. What language do you currently teach or plan to teach?
   _____ German  _____ Spanish  _____ French  _____ Other

3. What score did you receive on your recent completion of the Oral Proficiency Interview?
   _____ Int Mid  _____ Int High  _____ Adv Low or Higher

4. Are you currently working as a lateral entry teacher?
   _____ Yes  _____ No

5. Are you a native speaker of the language you teach or intend to teach?
   _____ Yes  _____ No

6. Have you ever completed a study abroad where you were immersed in the target language culture and community for more than 3 months?
   _____ Yes  _____ No

Section B: Open-Ended Questions

Please respond to the following open-ended questions:

7. What impact did the Oral Proficiency Interview requirement have on your decision to enroll in your foreign language teacher education program?

8. What drawbacks, if any, do you feel are associated with completing the Oral Proficiency Interview?

9. Do you feel the Oral Proficiency Interview is a necessary or unnecessary component of a foreign language teacher education program? Explain.

10. What could have been done by your foreign language teacher education program to further prepare you to complete the Oral Proficiency Interview?