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# Nurturing the Hothouse Special: When Proficiency Becomes Performance

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## **A Problem**

The U.S. Government Interagency Language Roundtable (ILR) Proficiency Definitions and the ACTFL/ETS Guidelines are becoming increasingly well-known and accepted in the profession for purposes of proficiency assessment, curriculum planning and materials design.<sup>1</sup> As use of the standards increases, there is an inevitable, natural temptation to adapt them for specific purposes. Experience in adapting the Guidelines and Definitions for a special audience is clarifying a number of dangers inherent in this temptation, dangers which must be addressed immediately if the standards themselves and our ability to use them to their maximum potential are to be preserved.<sup>2</sup>

The ACTFL/ETS Proficiency Guidelines, and the ILR Definitions from which they derive, take as their task the assessment and description of stages in the acquisition of *global* proficiency—the ability to use the *entire range* of the target language. Their ultimate point of reference is speech production equivalent to that of an *educated native speaker*. Three major categories to be considered in rating a speaker's proficiency are defined: function, content, and accuracy. Together they comprise the Functional Trisection and provide the underpinning for the proficiency level descriptions.<sup>3</sup>

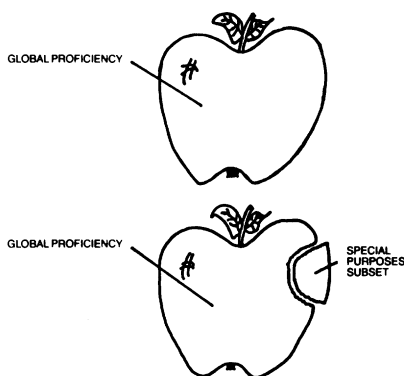
## **A Temptation**

It is precisely the descriptive nature of the Guidelines which makes the idea of adaptation so tempting. Based on the Functional Trisection, the Guidelines (and for upper-level proficiency the ILR Definitions) describe linguistic behaviors appropriate to each of the combined total of fourteen base and respective “plus” (ILR) or “sub” levels (ACTFL/ETS). They indicate, in general terms, the *tasks* the speaker will be able to accomplish with the language at hand, the range of *contexts* in which the tasks can be accomplished, and the linguistic and cultural *accuracy* with which they will be accomplished. At the lower end of the scale, those trained in oral proficiency interviewing and rating are acquainted with the “ten desperate subject areas,” to be used when all hope of actual conversation fails. From that point upward, the level descriptions offer a step-by-step map of the development of increasingly global competence.

Adaptation of the Guidelines is apt to be especially tempting for those who need to design special, new curricula such as those frequently subsumed under the rubric “special purposes”—foreign language courses

and course sequences for business and economics, health care and social service professionals, etc. Audiences for these courses have generally existed prior to the materials, and course designers and instructors must often invent (or reinvent in isolation from others with a similar need) their own particular wheel. Often coupled with this dearth of materials are the instructor's own limited training and experience in the nontraditional "special purpose" area.

Confronted with imperfect knowledge (and instructional materials) and offered a bite of the proficiency apple, it will be difficult to resist the temptation to adapt the Guidelines to more narrowly-defined purposes—even to rewrite them, narrowing and refining especially in the area of content, to meet special needs. But the bite is only part of the apple, and any narrower, focused application of the Guidelines is, by definition, no longer the *global* proficiency standard. The result is necessarily—and merely—a *subset* of the Guidelines. The subset is and remains a *part*



**Illustration Number 1: Schematic illustration of the relationship of general and special purpose subsets to global proficiency.**

of the whole; the whole is, by definition, the total of all special purpose and general subsets.

Although not a theoretical necessity, it is probable that in practice most subsets will be defined primarily by a limitation of *content* or *lexicon* rather than by the more universal aspects of function and accuracy. For example, in designing a course in German (or any other language) for business and economics, the focus on business and economics will primarily affect the choice of topics, i.e., vocabulary, rather than alter function or accuracy requirements.<sup>4</sup>

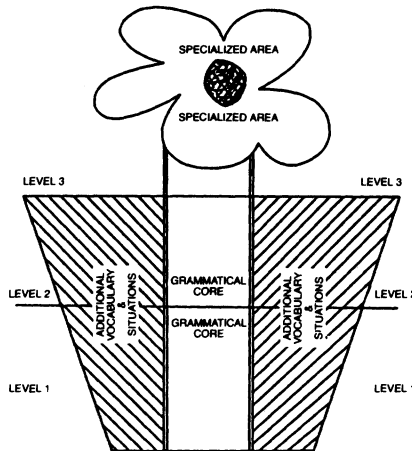
Yet teaching foreign language skills for special purposes is a legitimate undertaking, and a parallel phenomenon can be found within the global proficiency system. Oral proficiency training workshops and materials warn new interviewer-raters to be wary of the "Hothouse Special," stating:

The "Hothouse Special" is a candidate who can discourse impressively on one or two higher level topics, but fails to transfer

Hothouse Special usage of vocabulary and grammar to other topics. . . . Topics characteristic of “Hothouse Specials” tend to be delivered with ease, contain higher level vocabulary and grammar, and may appear to be memorized.

As a corrective, testers pursue noninterest areas to ascertain if the candidate can transfer his/her abilities and sustain the level on other, unprepared or unrehearsed topics.<sup>5</sup>

It is probably easier to think of the Hothouse Special as the speech sample rather than as the candidate. A Hothouse Special thus signifies an isolated example of proficiency higher than can be generally sustained—i.e., linguistic samples which do not accurately represent the candidate’s proficiency with regard to overall or global skill. The Hothouse Special can be compared to the objectives of the special purposes course. With limited, focused subject matter (or function or accuracy) goals, students achieve a certain performance level within carefully defined parameters. For specialized needs such as on-the-job skills, this ability can be marketed as the higher level, specialized performance it is. But unless the higher level performance can be *transferred* to other, general language areas and can be *sustained*, it will not affect the [global] proficiency rating. Thus testing in such specialized areas by definition resembles achievement testing more than proficiency testing. Yet the higher the level represented by the Hothouse Special, the more likely it is that the candidate will have acquired the higher level creative skills necessary to transfer what is learned to other linguistic behavior.



**Illustration Number 2: Pictorial Representation of a Hothouse Special<sup>a</sup>**

Because various adaptations and their applications will not fully represent the criteria and the standard of the Proficiency Guidelines and Definitions, it is important that the differences be strongly stated and kept absolutely clear in our minds, as well as in the minds of students

and other representatives of the skills markets addressed by special purposes courses. The ACTFL/ETS Guidelines, in conjunction with the ILR Definitions for the upper levels, offer the profession *and* the skills marketplace an unprecedented opportunity to organize efforts and interests around a comprehensive, unifying principle. We verge, for the first time, on the creation and implementation of a national, proficiency-based standard, a standard which enables articulation of efforts within the educational system *and* with the world beyond academe in which the *majority* of those we train will market and apply their skills.

As foreign language specialists, we are learning to speak a single, universally intelligible language about proficiency. But for this new language to maintain its power to communicate, we *must* protect it from imprecision and confusion in its own lexicon.

### A Proposal

'Proficiency,' 'performance,' 'achievement': these terms should be clearly defined. I propose the following: The term *proficiency* shall be reserved to refer strictly to the ILR Proficiency Definitions and the ACTFL/ETS Proficiency Guidelines, and to their related testing and rating procedures. The term *performance* shall be used to name and describe any derived subsets. *Performance* equates largely with *achievement*, although the former includes some of the functional and, at higher levels, the increasingly creative and global thrust of *proficiency*. Roughly:

performance = achievement + functional ability

proficiency = achievement + functional evidence of internalized strategies for creativity<sup>7</sup>

An immediate application of this distinction lies in the ability to separate proficiency, i.e., *global* teaching and testing, from special purposes, i.e., *performance* teaching and testing. Since performance testing tests only subsets, it cannot yield a proficiency rating. I believe this distinction to be definitionally sound, given the position performance occupies relative to proficiency and achievement.

As we develop and adapt the system to meet specific needs, failure to distinguish and label differences jeopardizes the standard. This could mean a loss from which it would take more than our professional lifetime to recover. We can avoid it.

### Notes

<sup>1</sup>This essay assumes basic familiarity with the Definitions, Guidelines, and their applications. For a history of the Guidelines projects, see Judith Liskin-Gasparro, "The ACTFL Proficiency Guidelines: A Historical Perspective," *Teaching for Proficiency, the Organizing Principle*, ed. Theodore V. Higgs (Skokie, IL: National Textbook Co., 1984), pp. 11-42; and Pardee Lowe, Jr., "The ILR Oral Interview: Origins, Applications, Pitfalls, and Implications," *Unterrichtspraxis*, 16 (1983), pp. 230-44.

<sup>2</sup>David V. Hiple and Kathryn Buck, "The Rationale for Defining and Measuring Foreign Language Proficiency in Programs for Business," *Foreign Language*

*Annals*, 17 (1984) pp. 525-28; Kathryn Buck and Pardee Lowe, Jr., *Provisional Business Foreign Language Performance Criteria for Oral Interaction Skills*, (forthcoming); and Kathryn Buck and Gregory H. Forsythe, "Proficiency Applications Beyond the Academic Classroom," *Foreign Language Proficiency in the Classroom and Beyond*, ed. Charles J. James (Skokie, IL: National Textbook Co., 1985).

<sup>3</sup>For a diagram and more detailed discussion of the Trisection, see Theodore V. Higgs and Ray T. Clifford, "The Push Toward Communication," *Curriculum, Competence, and the Foreign Language Teacher*, ed. Theodore V. Higgs (Skokie, IL: National Textbook Co., 1982), pp. 57-79.

<sup>4</sup>A course designed for opera singers, on the other hand, will contain quite different emphases within the proficiency framework, for example, quite accurate pronunciation and a large body of memorized material rather than a requirement to use language creatively or spontaneously.

<sup>5</sup>Pardee Lowe, Jr., *The ILR Handbook on Oral Interview Testing*, mimeo (Washington, DC: U.S. Interagency Language Roundtable, 1983), Chapter 6, p. 89.

<sup>6</sup>Lowe, *The ILR Handbook* (note 5), Chapter 6, p. 90.

<sup>7</sup>Ray Clifford, Academic Dean, Defense Language Institute, The Presidio at Monterey (CA), offers these formulations: An achievement test checks whether language exists; a performance test checks whether language is used; a proficiency test checks whether language is used creatively.



### **The Busiest on the Continent**

Rhein-Main airport, Frankfurt, is the busiest on the continent. Last year it totaled 222,000 landings and takeoffs and handled 17.8 million passengers. Only London's Heathrow is busier, but Rhein-Main leads in Europe with 685,000 tons of air cargo.

Frankfurt is by far the largest of Germany's eleven airports, accounting for 37 percent of their total passengers and 77 percent of their combined air cargo. It is an important economic factor in the *Land* of Hesse, where it employs 32,519 individuals, making it the third largest employer in the state.

Since 1976 the airport has regularly reported profits in tens of millions of marks. In 1982 its turnover was 806 million marks and profits amounted to 53.9 million marks. Between 1983 and 1985 it plans to invest 440 million marks in runway modernization and maintenance.