Using the OPI to Place Heritage Speakers of Russian

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Abstract: This study explored the possibility of using an ACTFL oral proficiency interview (OPI) to assess the spoken proficiency of heritage language speakers of Russian for the purpose of placing them in Russian language classes. The authors also considered whether the norm of an educated native speaker could be used as a valid reference point for Russian heritage speakers. The OPI was administered to a group of college-age Russian heritage speakers with little or no formal instruction in the language. The results indicated that the ACTFL Proficiency Guidelines could be used to assess oral proficiency of Russian heritage speakers and that the standard of an educated native speaker of Russian could be used as a norm.

Introduction
Since the mid-1980s, foreign language instructors have been using oral proficiency interviews (OPIs) with descriptors designed by ACTFL to place students into language programs, to evaluate students’ progress, and to assess the effectiveness of language programs. However, some foreign language educators have questioned the validity of the ACTFL Proficiency Guidelines (Breiner-Sanders et al., 2000) in evaluating the oral proficiency of so-called “heritage” language speakers—that is, speakers who come from homes where the target language is spoken (e.g., Draper & Hicks, 2000; Lowe, 1998; Valdés, 1989).

These objections are based largely on the observation that because of their long exposure to the language in a naturalistic environment, heritage language speakers typically have language skills that distinguish them from the traditional foreign language speakers for whom the ACTFL Guidelines were designed. While heritage speakers display a wide range of language proficiencies, they often have near-native phonology, an extensive everyday vocabulary, some knowledge of the grammar (although it may not be fully acquired), and considerable fluency, as well as a host of strategic and discourse competencies (e.g., Campbell & Rosenthal, 2000; Kagan & Dillon, 2001; Schwartz, 2001; Valdés, 2001). On the other hand, their speech may also display traits of substandard or émigré language and dialectic features, and may be marked by code switching, English borrowings, and calques (Danesi, 1986; Polinsky, 2000, in press). In addition, because their schooling has been primarily, if not exclusively, in English, they often have undeveloped, and in some cases nonexistent, literacy skills.

Valdés (1989) argued that “these [ACTFL] levels were described for the foreign language learner, that is, for the traditional student of foreign languages in this country who begins his/her studies at point zero” and that they therefore do not describe the acquisition process of a typical

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heritage language speaker who has acquired some proficiency in that language before beginning formal instruction (p. 395). Similarly, Lowe (1998), while acknowledging that "ACTFL is devoting considerable effort" to testing heritage speakers, noted that these speakers "rarely completely fulfill the definitions [of the OPI Guidelines] as currently crafted" (p. 375).

Moreover, because the Guidelines use the language as spoken by educated native speakers as the standard and do not take into account the existence of native nonstandard varieties, there has been concern that the ACTFL OPI does not accurately measure the oral competency of speakers of these varieties. Valdés (1989) suggested that students who are competent speakers of a nonstandard variety of Spanish might be penalized because of the presumed "inaccuracy" or "noncomprehensibility" of their speech as judged by the norms of standard Spanish as taught in university departments. Her argument was echoed by Draper and Hicks (2000), who questioned the use of the OPI for Spanish heritage language speakers because it "has the potential to lead to the denigration of a rating based on the variety of the language spoken" (p. 32).

However, it is not clear whether the problem of assessing nonstandard native varieties, an issue in the Spanish context, would be equally applicable to other languages. The case of Russian offers an interesting example. Most recent immigrants from Russian-speaking countries to the United States have relatively high education levels: Sixty-four percent of the "third wave" of Russian immigrants (the group that arrived in the United States from 1970 to 1989) had education beyond high school (Andrews, 1998).

Although there is regional variation in spoken Russian, because of uniform education in the Soviet Union and the standardization of speech on radio and television, native speakers who have attended high school show few regional features in their speech (Comrie, Stone, & Polinsky, 1996). Therefore, even though Russian heritage language speakers themselves may not have had any schooling in a Russian-speaking country, they are likely to have been exposed to standard Russian at home because it is the language spoken by their families. It therefore might be possible to use the OPI as a valid measure of oral proficiency for Russian heritage speakers, since the problem of dialect variation would be minimal and the standards of educated Russian would be acceptable.

In this study, we explored the possibility of using the ACTFL Guidelines to assess the oral proficiency of Russian heritage language speakers for the purpose of placing them in Russian language classes. Finding appropriate instruments to test heritage language speakers' oral ability for placement and diagnostic purposes has become a major issue among foreign language instructors (UC Heritage Guidelines, 2002). For example, even though university Spanish departments have taught heritage speakers for much longer than instructors of less commonly taught languages, few tests have been designed to determine "whether the student goes into a class for native speakers or into a regular Spanish class" (Otheguy & Toro, 2000, p. 92). Using the OPI to evaluate the oral skills of heritage language speakers is therefore worth investigating.

We sought to answer the following research questions:

1. To what extent can the ACTFL Proficiency Guidelines provide an accurate description of Russian heritage language speakers' oral proficiency before they begin formal language instruction?
2. Can the "educated native speaker" standard of the Guidelines be applied to heritage language speakers of languages, such as Russian, that have minimal dialectal variation?

The Study

Subjects

The subjects for this study were 11 heritage speakers of Russian enrolled in a beginning Russian course for heritage speakers at a large public university in the western United States. Their schooling had been exclusively or almost exclusively in English. They represented a group that Polinsky (2000) eloquently referred to as "incomplete acquirers" or "forgetters." Biographical information, including students' self-assessments of their language proficiency, can be found in Table 1.

Procedure

The OPI was administered in the fall semester of 2002, during the second week of instruction. The interview used in this study can be described as a combination of an OPI and a Simulated Oral Proficiency Test (SOPI.)

The SOPI, originally developed by the Center for Applied Linguistics, differs from the OPI in several respects. Whereas the OPI is administered individually in a face-to-face interview between a trained tester and an interviewee, the SOPI is typically administered to a group of speakers who listen to questions and record answers on a tape. Because the SOPI consists of a fixed set of questions and does not allow interaction between an interviewer and interviewee, it cannot be adapted to the individual language ability of the interviewee, as can the OPI.

The differences between the OPI and the SOPI have been shown to generate different types of discourse (e.g., Koike, 1998), with the OPI seen as closer to a "natural" conversation (for a further discussion on the differences between the OPI and the SOPI, see Kuo & Jiang, 1997). However, despite these differences, semidirect tests such as the SOPI have been shown to have a high degree of concurrent validity with face-to-face OPIs (Shohamy, Gordon, Kenyon, & Stansfield, 1989; Stansfield & Kenyon, 1992).

Similar to the SOPI, our interviews were administered to a group in a computer laboratory, where each student sat at a computer station equipped with a Zip drive. The test
### BIOGRAPHICAL DATA

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Testee</th>
<th>Place of Birth</th>
<th>Age at Arrival</th>
<th>How often do you speak Russian?</th>
<th>Self-Rating (0 = none; 5 = excellent)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>With whom?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1. VB</td>
<td>Vinnitsia, Ukraine</td>
<td>7 years old</td>
<td>Every day (parents)</td>
<td>Listen: 3 Read: 0 Speak: 3 Write: 0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Started 1st grade</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. DB</td>
<td>Kiev, Ukraine</td>
<td>7 years old</td>
<td>Sometimes (parents, friends, relatives)</td>
<td>Listen: 4 Read: 0 Speak: 3 Write: 0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Started 1st grade</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. SI</td>
<td>Los Angeles, CA</td>
<td>No instruction</td>
<td>Rarely (brother)</td>
<td>No data</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. GE</td>
<td>Riga, Latvia</td>
<td>10 years old</td>
<td>Sometimes (mother)</td>
<td>Listen: 4 Read: 2 Speak: 5 Write: 1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>4 years of school</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. YF</td>
<td>Odessa, Ukraine</td>
<td>4.5 years old</td>
<td>Every day (family, friends)</td>
<td>Listen: 4.5 Read: 1 Speak: 3.5/4 Write: 1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. MF</td>
<td>Tbilisi, Georgia</td>
<td>5 years old</td>
<td>Rarely (grandmother)</td>
<td>Listen: 4 Read: 0 Speak: 2 Write: 0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>No instruction</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. MK</td>
<td>Moscow, Russia</td>
<td>5 years old</td>
<td>Every day (parents, grandparents)</td>
<td>Listen: 5 Read: 1 Speak: 4 Write: 0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. NN</td>
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<td>8 years old</td>
<td>Rarely (grandparents)</td>
<td>Listen: 4 Read: 2 Speak: 3 Write: 2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>1 year in school</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Tashkent</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9. YN</td>
<td>Minsk, Belarus</td>
<td>7 years old</td>
<td>Rarely (parents)</td>
<td>Listen: 4 Read: 0 Speak: 3 Write: 0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>1 year in Minsk</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10. DR</td>
<td>Los Angeles, CA</td>
<td>No instruction</td>
<td>Every day (family)</td>
<td>Listen: 5 Read: 2 Speak: 4 Write: 2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11. LR</td>
<td>Odessa, Ukraine</td>
<td>5 years old</td>
<td>Sometimes (family)</td>
<td>Listen: 5 Read: 0 Speak: 4 Write: 0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Administrator, the primary researcher, posed a question in Russian to the entire group and waited for the majority of the students to answer before going on to the next question. The students recorded their answers using PureVoice software. The total speaking time was between 20 and 30 minutes (depending on the student), thus conforming to the time frame suggested by the *ACTFL Oral Proficiency Interview Tester Training Manual* (Swender, 1999, p. 39).

Although the interviewees could not directly engage
the interviewer in conversation, the interviewer listened and observed as much as possible. As in the OPI, the interviewer could modify the test questions and thus make the test more responsive to the language proficiencies displayed by the interviewees. After the first three questions, she was able to establish that the floor was between Intermediate-Low and Intermediate-Mid for the majority of the group. She then chose to probe for the Intermediate-High and Advanced levels.

The questions can be found in the Appendix. The list included a warm-up (question 1), personal narration in the present or past tense (2, 3, and 9), description/narration in the past and present/future tense using pictures (5 and 6), comparison (7), description of a process (8), role play interaction (4, 10), interaction with a built-in complication (11), and a wrap-up (12). Two questions allowed students to demonstrate their proficiency up to a Superior level (7 and 8). Discourse skills needed in answering question 11 could also serve as an indicator of higher proficiency.

Analysis

The interviews were rated by the primary researcher using the rating criteria from the 1999 ACTFL Oral Proficiency Interview Tester Training Manual. These criteria are related to global tasks or functions; contexts and content areas; accuracy (fluency, grammar, pragmatic competence, pronunciation, sociolinguistic competence, vocabulary), and text type (Swender, 1999, pp. 21-30).

In accordance with the Tester Training Manual, each interviewee received a single holistic score. However, to illustrate how these criteria were applied to the data, we present a more detailed analysis of a single response here. The interviewee was responding to question 4, in which interviewees were instructed to record a message in which interviewees were instructed to record a message in which interviewees were instructed to record a message.

Example 1

Zdravstvuite Ol'ga Evgen'evna. Ia khotela vam pozvonit' izvinitsia chto ia segodnia ne smogu s vami vstretil'sia potomu chto u menia klass i ia to'ko smogu k vam prideti v dva. Ia izviniaus' i nadeius' chto vy tozhe smozhe prideti v dva. Esli vy mozhe prideti mne pozhaluista. Do svidaniia.

Hello, Olga Evgen'eva. I wanted to call you to apologize that I will not be able to meet with you today because I have a class and I can only come to you at two. I apologize and I hope that you also can come at two. If you can, please call me. Good-bye.

Evaluation

Global task or function: The task of leaving a message was carried out successfully, and the student dealt successfully with a built-in complication.

Context: The speaker displayed the linguistic flexibility necessary to deal with the formal setting successfully.

Content: The content was appropriate to the task.

Accuracy: The speaker used a native rate of speech; correct use of morphology and syntax; discourse management sufficient to get the message across; native-like pronunciation; appropriate register. The lexicon adhered to norm.

Text type: The paragraph-length text was organized according to the conventions of educated standard Russian.

Summary

The speaker appropriately addressed the professor by using her name and patronymic, the formal second person pronoun vy (vam, vami, vy), and the polite form of the imperative perezvonite, 'call,' and offered sufficient apology in the proper register. There was only one instance of a vocabulary problem, in which the Russian word klass was extended to an inappropriate context (the Russian word usually refers only to a group of students or to a classroom, not to a course or lesson).

Overall Assessment

The message was delivered in a native-like manner, corresponding to the Advanced level of proficiency (or higher).

Results and Discussion

Of the 11 interviewees, three were rated Advanced, six were rated Intermediate-Mid, and two were rated Intermediate-Low. Since 8 of 11 interviewees received a rating between Intermediate-Low and Intermediate-Mid, we will focus our discussion on the Intermediate-level speaker.

Using the ACTFL Guidelines to Assess Heritage Speakers

The first research question asked whether the ACTFL Proficiency Guidelines can provide an accurate description of the oral proficiency of Russian heritage speakers. To answer this question, we will compare the Intermediate speakers' performance with the rating criteria as they are stated in the Tester Manual (Swender, 1999, pp. 21–31).

Global task or functions: In accordance with the criteria, Intermediate-level heritage speakers in the study could "create with the language, initiate, maintain, ask and answer questions, and bring to a close simple conversation" (p. 22). However, Advanced-level tasks such as narration and description (Questions 5 and 6) proved difficult for interviewees at this level.
Context and content: The interviewees could function in "some informal settings and ... transactional situations" (p. 24). The content mostly related to daily activities and personal involvement. Unlike Advanced-level speakers, these heritage speakers could not deal with formal settings or use abstract vocabulary. In Question 7, which called for a comparison, they compared private and public universities using themselves as examples, rather than attempting a higher-level comparison that would need abstract vocabulary.

Accuracy: The proficiencies of Intermediate-level speakers in the study were mixed. Grammatical forms conformed to Intermediate-level rating criteria and were "flawed, but there [was] sufficient precision of form to allow for communication..." (p. 27). In terms of pragmatic competence, the speakers used some discourse devices to get the message across but also relied on code switching as a compensatory device. The speakers displayed limited sociolinguistic competence and used informal register when formal register was called for. The range of vocabulary was limited in comparison with a native speaker but sufficient for everyday informal situations. However, the speakers pronunciation was comprehensible and/or native-like, and overall their Accuracy rating fit the Advanced-level description in that their speech could "be understood by native speakers...not accustomed to dealing with non-natives speaking their language" (p. 26).

Text type: The utterances of these Intermediate-level heritage speakers conformed to the rating criteria for this level. They were able to "link many of their utterances into complex sentences and many of their sentences in discourse of paragraph length" (p. 29). However, although they used cohesive devices, "linking devices [were] minimal" (p. 30).

Overall, the heritage speakers who were rated Intermediate in our study conformed to the ACTFL rating criteria for this level. Example 2 below illustrates the performance of an Intermediate-Mid level speaker in response to Question 7, which asked interviewees to express their preferences for different types of universities.

Example 2

Ia dumaiu chto samyi luchshii universitet gde mozhe no uchitsia eto malen'kii gosudarstvennyi universitet...Ne u vsekh est' ochen' mnogo deneg. Ya dumaiu chto esi ty xoroshaiia studentka ili xoroshii student gosudarstvo dolzno platit' za tvoe obuchenie potomy chto ia ne xochu platit'. Tak chto samyi luchshii dlia menia malen'kii universitet no gosudarstvennyi chtoby ne mnogo platit'.

I think that the best university where it is possible to study is a small state university...Not everyone has a lot of money and I think that if you are a good student the government should pay for your education because I do not want to pay. So the best university for me is a small university, but a state one so that there's not a lot to pay.

This is a Superior-level task that calls for "supported opinion," but the speaker relies on personal example instead. There are some cohesive devices (cho, gde, potomy chto, tak, chto, no, chtoby) but they "do not bind the discourse together" because the speaker just "string[s] propositions and sentences together...but linking devices are minimal." There are no grammar mistakes but the lexicon is limited. This description fits a profile of an Intermediate-Mid speaker.

Some of these speakers deviated from the ACTFL descriptors in three areas: pronunciation, fluency (rate of speech), and vocabulary. We discuss these features in more detail below.

One difference is that while the Guidelines state that Intermediate-level speakers "can be understood, with some repetition, by speakers accustomed to dealing with non-native speakers" (p. 28), the Intermediate-level heritage speakers in this study could be understood by a native speaker not used to dealing with nonnative speakers. The main reason why their speech was more comprehensible was their phonology. Even though heritage speakers' pronunciation and intonation deviated from the native norm (for example, there was a shift of all vowels backwards and interference of American English aspiration [Polinsky, 2000, p. 454] as well as changes in intonation [Andrews, 1998; Zemskaja, 2000]), their speech was easily understandable.

Their fluency was also higher than that of traditional foreign language learners of Russian. The interviewees in our study displayed a certain "defiance" and readiness to engage in any conversational interaction. To compare the relative fluency of these heritage speakers, we administered an identical OPI interview to a group of Russian native speakers (NS) and a group of foreign language learners of Russian (RFL). The native speakers were all educated Russians who immigrated from Russia in the mid-1970s to mid-1980s. The foreign language learners had three or more years of college-level instruction in Russian, and three of these students (RFL1, RFL3, and RFL4) had spent a semester in an Education Abroad Program in Russia. We then determined a fluency rate by calculating the number of words spoken per minute for each interviewee in response to Question 8. The results can be found in Table 2.2

As seen in Table 2, the rate of speech of many of the heritage speakers was equal to that of the native speakers. Only one of the foreign language learners (RFL1) came close to a native rate of fluency, with a score of 72.8 words
per minute. Conversely, only the slowest heritage speaker (SI) had a rate in the same range as the foreign language learners.

Vocabulary merits special attention. Neither proficiencies nor deficiencies of heritage language speakers can be analyzed or understood without a study of their vocabulary peculiarities. On the one hand, the range of vocabulary displayed by the heritage speakers in our study is broad in comparison with that of a traditional student of Russian as a foreign language. The situation is the same as in Spanish where "[t]eachers must recognize that heritage speakers...have already internalized many grammatical concepts and a significant amount of vocabulary" (Samaniego & Pino, 2000, p. 32).

On the other hand, there was a heavy reliance on code switches and calques, which are typical for heritage learners of Russian (Andrews 1998, Polinsky 2000, Zemskaja 2001). While the ACTFL Guidelines (2000) for Intermediate-High speakers do note "use of code-switching, false cognates, literal translations, etc." (p. 16), in some cases in our data the code switching was so extensive that the sample was rated incomprehensible. In Example 3, the interviewee is responding to Question 8, which asks what one needs to do to get into a university.

Example 3

_Nado snachala idti v high school i tam nado brat' tiazhelelykh klassy brat' mnogo ikh i khoroshe otsenki poluchat'...potom ...nado brat' SAT test i tam khorosho sdelat' i khorosho brat' v high school AP classes. Nado application dobyvat' nado khorosho application sdelat'._

It is necessary first to go to high school and there it is necessary to take difficult classes to take a lot of them and to receive good grades...then...to take SAT test and to do well there and it's good to take AP classes in high school...it is necessary to get (with difficulty) an application it is necessary to do the application well.

In Example 3, the speaker inserts so many English words, such as _high school, SAT test, AP classes, and application_ that his speech would be incomprehensible to a native speaker of Russian who does not know English. In addition, many expressions reflect English usage rather than Russian. For example the speaker says _idti v high school_ (‘to go to high school’) although the Russian verb _idti_ (‘to go’) is not used in this sense of ‘attend.’ Similarly, the verb _brat_ (‘to take’) is not used in Russian in the sense of ‘to take classes’ or ‘to take a test.’

While this is an extreme example, other interviewees used code switching and calques as the major compensatory strategy. These speakers generally received lower over-

**Table 2**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Testee</th>
<th>Overall Time</th>
<th>N words</th>
<th>Words per Minute</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>sec</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1. VB</td>
<td>66</td>
<td>113</td>
<td>102</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. DB</td>
<td>81</td>
<td>155</td>
<td>114</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. GE</td>
<td>108</td>
<td>210</td>
<td>116</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. YF</td>
<td>84</td>
<td>138</td>
<td>98.57</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. MF</td>
<td>130</td>
<td>223</td>
<td>102.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. SI</td>
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<td>43</td>
</tr>
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<td>7. MK</td>
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<td>8. NN</td>
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nonstandard Spanish may be rated "incomprehensible" because of the dialect they speak. In the case of Russian, the incomprehensibility is mostly the result of heavy code switching. For Question 8, the responses of VB, SI, and YN were rated as incomprehensible because of a large number of code switches and calques. Two of these three interviewees received an overall rating of Intermediate-Low. Together with borrowings and calques, code switching was the most egregious feature of the interviews with the Russian heritage speakers in the study.

However, we do not believe that the deviations from the ACTFL descriptors detailed above provide sufficient reason to reject the use of the Guidelines for assessing heritage speakers. The Tester Manual stresses that "[t]he Oral Proficiency Interview is an integrative test, i.e. it addresses a number of abilities simultaneously and looks at them from a global perspective" (p. 21). It also states that "[w]hen rating linguistic performance in an interview," testers should pay attention to whether "the global tasks were successfully carried out" and not "point to specific grammatical or lexical deficiencies as the determining factors in justifying a rating" (p. 21).

The specific features of heritage speakers' speech noted above would become an issue only if the rater were to focus on discrete elements, such as fluency or vocabulary, rather than taking the more global approach recommended in the Tester's Manual. If the tester strictly adheres to the Manual's recommendation, there should be no difficulty using the OPI with heritage speakers of Russian and the rating of heritage and nonheritage speakers can be considered comparable even though the elements that go into the "rating basket" may be different.

In order for the OPI interview to be useful for placement purposes, the tester needs to be familiar with the features of the heritage language, in the same way that he or she would be expected to be familiar with the profiles of traditional language learners. When placing heritage speakers, one needs to remember that their oral proficiency may be far ahead of their literacy. The tester must not be misled by their rate of speech; at the same time, the subject should not be dismissed as an incompetent speaker because of his or her heavy use of code switching. Without such careful assessment by the tester, students may be placed below or above their true proficiency levels.

### Table 3

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Subject</th>
<th>Overall Rating</th>
<th>N words</th>
<th>N code-switches</th>
<th>N calques</th>
<th>Ratio %</th>
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<td>2.5</td>
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<td>A</td>
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<td>4</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>6.6</td>
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<tr>
<td>4. YF</td>
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The results of the OPIs in this study are consistent with Gonzales Pino and Pino's (2000) data indicating that "many heritage students with Intermediate-High and Advanced [oral] proficiency...enter Spanish programs at the upper level" and miss the instruction in reading and writing that they need (p. 29). As with the traditional foreign language learner, the OPI cannot serve as the sole measure of heritage student proficiency.

The attitude of the tester towards nonstandard speech is also crucial, as the tester's behavior or negative attitude could have an impact on the interview itself and on the rating (Reed & Cohen, 2001). For a discussion of language attitudes in general and their impact on perceptions of comprehensibility, see Martinez (2003) and Lindemann (2002). As Perez-Leroux and Glass (2000) noted, "[i]nstructors unskilled in managing linguistic diversity may have difficulties in dealing with students that are minority native speakers of the target language" (p. 59). There is a considerable amount of literature dealing with the attitude of instructors to speakers of Spanish (e.g., Gutierrez, 1997; Potowski, 2000).

Even though, as stated earlier, Russian is not a language of many dialectal varieties, the matter of attitude is still relevant. For example, an educated native speaker of Russian may be biased against certain features in a speaker's language or refer to the language with contempt as "kitchen Russian." Perez-Leroux and Glass (2000) stated succinctly that "[t]here are few places where the question of linguistic bias is as important as it is in the language classroom" (p. 61). It is thus easy to see the importance of training foreign language instructors to deal with the unique traits of heritage language.

**Educated Speaker Norm**

The issue of attitude is also relevant to our second research question about the appropriateness of using "the well-educated native speaker" as a reference point. It is a question that has been discussed and much debated in the testing literature over the years and is one of the main arguments that Valdés (1989) made against using the OPI with Spanish heritage speakers. On the other hand, Lowe (1998) urged retaining that "ultimate reference point" because without it "there is no cap to the system" (p. 374).

In case of Russian, we believe that there is every reason to use the educated speaker norm for reference. As noted earlier, Russian heritage speakers typically come from educated families (Andrews, 1998; Zemskaja, 2001). The differences between the language used by Russian-speaking families in the United States and standard Russian as spoken in Russia are not regional or social variations as much as code switching, English borrowings, and calques. This so-called "American Russian" (Polinsky, 2000) is not spoken anywhere in Russia. For these reasons, we advocate using the Russian educated norm as a reference point in the OPI rating and do not believe that it is an obstacle to using the OPI ratings with heritage speakers of Russian. That is, we would not be unfairly stigmatizing or penalizing them, as might be the case with Spanish.

**Conclusion**

The authors of the Final Report of the Heritage Language Research Priorities Conference held at UCLA in September 2000 (http://www.cal/heritage) asked, "What are the limitations of current methods of assessing language performance and making inferences about linguistic knowledge (e.g. the ACTFL proficiency levels and the National Standards), especially for heritage language learners?" Our study, while limited in scope, took some preliminary steps toward answering this question. Our results indicated that, unlike Spanish speakers in Valdés's (1989) study, heritage speakers of Russian can be assessed according to the ACTFL Guidelines. Russian has few dialectal features and using educated Russian as a basis for measuring proficiency would not only be appropriate but desirable.

However, we agree with Valdés (1989) that OPI testers of heritage language speakers need to be sensitive to linguistic features typical of heritage learners and should make every effort to familiarize themselves with the patterns of heritage language. It is possible that OPI raters not familiar with patterns of Russian émigré speech might declare some samples of their students' speech not useful for diagnostic and other purposes, or rate them too high or too low.

If two students, a heritage speaker of Russian and a traditional language learner, are both assigned an "Intermediate" rating on the ACTFL score, does it mean that they can perform equally in the language and be placed in the same class? As mentioned earlier, heritage speakers typically have better pronunciation, higher fluency, and possibly a broader vocabulary range; however in terms of the global tasks that they can accomplish, they rate the same as traditional language learners. In that sense, the rating is comparable. Yet whether they can be placed in the same class is a different question. On the basis of our experience (Kagan & Dillon, 2003) we suggest using the OPI as part of a placement procedure for heritage speakers. In addition, the instructor needs to collect biographical information and give the students a written test if they are literate. This tri-part assessment leads to an accurate placement if a college program is set up to meet the needs of these nontraditional learners.

**Acknowledgments**

We are grateful to Ray Clifford, whose invitation to submit an article for this special issue provided an impetus for this study. Our profound gratitude goes to the anonymous reviewer whose in-depth constructive criticism led to revision of the article and to what hopefully is a much clearer version of the study. We are thankful to Kathleen Dillon...
and Maria Polinsky for helpful discussion. Finally, we owe a true debt of gratitude to our students, who are always our willing subjects.

Notes

1. Following the ACTFL OPI Tester’s Manual, we define fluency as “rate of speech and the use of cohesive devices” (p. 25).

2. The primary researcher was certified as an OPI tester in 1989. She did not renew her certification, but she is very familiar with ACTFL Guidelines.

3. We felt that given the preliminary nature of the study, a second rating (while desirable) was not crucial to the results.

4. All examples have been transliterated following the Library of Congress system.

5. The rate of speech of the native speakers in the study is consistent with Polinsky's (in press) results. However, the rates for heritage speakers are much higher than what Polinsky has found. The difference may be due to the genre: Polinsky analyzed a five-minute long narrative.

References


Polinsky M. (2000). The composite linguistic profile of speakers of Russian in the US. In O. Kagan & B. Bilkin (Eds.), The learning and teaching of Slavic languages and cultures (pp. 437–65). Bloomington, IN: Slavica.


Appendix

OPI Questions

Question 1: Give your name and tell about yourself and your family. (Warm-up/personal)

Question 2: Describe your typical day. (Present-tense narrative)

Question 3: What did you do and where were you during last summer vacation? (Past tense narrative)

Question 4: You have agreed to meet with a professor, whose name is Olga Evgenyvna, at 1 o'clock. However, you realize that you can only come at 2 o'clock. Leave a message on her answering machine. (Apologetic)

Question 5: Picture 1 (Boy and girl): What is happening with them? How did this happen? What is she saying? (Description)

Question 6: Picture 2 (Group of people in a room): What is happening here? (Description)

Question 7: In which kind university is it better to study, in a large one or a small one? In a private or public one? (Comparison; supported opinion)

Question 8: How do you get into a good college? (Description of a process)

Question 9: Tell about any trip that you have taken. (Past tense narrative)

Question 10: Introduce a friend to your Russian-speaking grandparents. (Introductions)

Question 11: You bought a pair of shoes in Russia, but they are the wrong size. Return them to the store. (Complaining)

Question 12: Why are you studying Russian? (Winding-down)