Oral Proficiency Interview Guidelines

The Oral Proficiency Interview (OPI) was developed by the American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages (ACTFL) in collaboration with the Educational Testing Service (ETS). The goal of the OPI, an interaction between interviewer and interviewee, is to obtain a sample of speech that can be rated using the ACFTL Proficiency Guidelines. These guidelines comprise levels from Novice to Superior, according to the content (descriptions about certain matters at a certain level, i.e. greetings, health, family, daily routines, work, study, etc.) the function (descriptions in a certain tense, i.e. past, present, future and expressions of agreement or disagreement in such tenses) and the accuracy (presence or lack of errors that may or may not interfere with the communication) present in the interviewee’s speech.

The phases used during this face-to-face interaction are four:
1. Warm-up - first portion of interview, less than three minutes long, with the purpose of making the interviewee feel comfortable. It consists of greetings, and exchanging of everyday social amenities;
2. Level Check - second portion of interview, which consists of checking the highest level of proficiency of the interviewee. If during the level check, the interviewer notices that the level is not the one expected, s/he will adjust the level of the questions either upward or downward. This phase is repeated several times during the interview and alternates with the probe phase;
3. Probes - Probes are questions designed to spur a language level higher than the one expected. If the probe is successful, the interviewer can start level checking at this higher level; if the probe is not successful then this is a good indicator that the interviewee’s proficiency is at the level expected. The probes should be alternated with level checks, to establish the right rating;
4. Wind-down - last portion of interview (few minutes), back at the level at which the interviewee functions best. The interviewer ends the conversation thanking the interviewee. This termination resembles the way in which conversations normally end in authentic situations.
The rating is also divided in four categories, with three subcategories per each rating: **Novice** (Low, Mid, High), **Intermediate** (Low, Mid, High), **Advanced** (Low, Mid, High), and **Superior** (Low, Mid, High).

For our purposes, it is essential to understand the distinction between the NOVICE and INTERMEDIATE levels. The general characteristics are here summarized:

**NOVICE-LOW**: Oral production consists of isolated words and perhaps a few high-frequency phrases (i.e. formal greetings). Essentially there is no functional communication.

**NOVICE-MID**: Oral production continues to consist of isolated words and learned phrases within very predictable areas of need, although quantity is increased. Vocabulary is sufficient only for handling simple needs and expressing basic courtesies. Utterances rarely consist of more than two or three words and show frequent long pauses and repetition of interviewer’s words. Some Novice-Mid speakers will be understood only with difficulty.

**NOVICE-HIGH**: Able to satisfy the requirements of basic communication by relying on learned utterances but occasionally expanding these through simple re-combinations of their elements. Interviewee shows some signs of spontaneity, though this falls short of autonomy of expression. Vocabulary centers on areas such as basic objects, places, and most common family terms. Errors are frequent; pronunciation may still be strongly influenced by first language. As a rule a Novice High speaker can perform at the level of Intermediate Low at least 60% of the time but is not able to maintain this level consistently.

The Intermediate level is characterized by the speaker’s ability to: create with the language by combining and recombining learned elements, though mainly in a reactive mode; initiate, minimally sustain, and close in a simple way basic communicative tasks; ask and answer questions.

**INTERMEDIATE-LOW**: Able to handle successfully a limited number of interactive, task-oriented, and social situations. Can initiate and
respond to simple statements, and maintain face-to-face conversation, although with much linguistic inaccuracy. Interviewee can perform tasks as introducing self, ordering a meal, asking directions, and making purchases. Vocabulary is adequate to express only elementary needs. Misunderstandings may arise but with repetition, the Intermediate-Low speaker can generally be understood by interlocutors accustomed to foreigners.

INTERMEDIATE-MID: Able to handle successfully a variety of uncomplicated, basic, and communicative tasks and social situations. The interviewee can talk simply about self and his or her family members. Can ask and answer questions on topics beyond most immediate needs; e.g. personal history and leisure time. Utterance length increases slightly, but speech may still be characterized by frequent and long pauses. Pronunciation may continue to be strongly influenced by first language and fluency may still be strained. The Intermediate-Mid can generally be understood by interlocutors accustomed to foreigners.

INTERMEDIATE-HIGH: Able to handle successfully most uncomplicated communicative tasks and social situations. Can initiate, sustain, and close a general conversation with a number of strategies appropriate to a range of circumstances and topics, but errors are present. There is emerging evidence of connected discourse, particularly for simple narration and/or description. The Intermediate-High speaker can generally be understood even by interlocutors not accustomed to foreigners, but repetition may be required.

GRADES: If you are at the level expected for your class (Novice Mid for 1010, and Intermediate Low for 1020), you will receive 10 points; otherwise 2 points will be deducted for ea. subcategory missed.

GENERAL SUGGESTIONS

1. The interview is NOT a teaching experience. Interviewer will not correct errors, will not fill in the pauses, will not prompt or give vocabulary.
2. The interview IS a friendly conversation of 8-10 minutes which will give the interviewee the opportunity to demonstrate his/her ability to communicate in French, and the interviewer an additional tool to measure the students’ performance and the overall level of the class.

3. Oui/non questions may be a good way to break the ice but they are only for initial phase. The interviewer will go on to questions which will elicit speech from the interviewee: “Décrivez...,” “Parlez de...,” “Comment est....”

4. The interviewee is expected to keep his/her appointment with interviewer. If s/he forgets to show up, s/he will lose 5 points from the interview’s grade. Sign-ups for the interviews, scheduled on the last days of class meetings, are to be taken in class. Be sure to write down your appointed time.

5. There are two parts to the interview. In part one, the interviewee will be asked questions. In the second part, the interviewee will be given one situation similar to the ones listed below.

6. Using situations. The interviewer will have situations on 3 X 5 cards. The situation is explained in English. The interviewee will read the card out loud. The interviewer will interact with the interviewee. Upon completion, the wind-down phase will begin.

**SAMPLE SITUATIONS**

*FLFR1010*

1. It is your first day of class and you introduce yourself to your mates (name, origin, your schedule, your hobbies, and your family).

2. You are meeting your Academic Advisor. Describe your course schedule and express your wishes for a career after your studies.

3. Saturday plans for you and your friends. Describe the weather and the activities that one can do in these weather conditions. Then talk about activities that you like or dislike, and why.

4. You are a reporter and you want to know as much as possible about me to write an article on the school paper. Ask questions.
5. You are invited to a party. Be sure to ask about: the place and time of the party, what you should bring, the persons who will be there as well, the clothes you should wear, the occasion for celebration etc.

*FLFR1020*

1. You are at a restaurant. Order your favorite meal and drinks. Before you go back home, you stop at a grocery store to purchase all you need to prepare a nice breakfast for the morning after.

2. Make comparison between your life now and your life ten years ago. Be sure to say something about your residence, your hobbies, your family, etc.

3. You are a doctor. I am the patient. Ask about my health, give suggestions or cure to improve my health conditions.

4. You want to go to France. Make all arrangements for your travel with a travel agency.

5. Your and your friends are going to the movies. What movie will you watch? Describe plot and actors. If tickets are sold out, what options do you have?