

Comparison of the ACTFL Proficiency Guidelines and the Common European  
Framework of Reference (CEFR)  
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Initial notes and guide to formatting indications:

CEFR reduced here to 3 rubrics: Content, Function, Accuracy.

Plain text below = ACTFL's guidelines for oral proficiency; italics = CEFR.

ACTFL = The American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages ([www.actfl.org](http://www.actfl.org))

Quotations are from their respective documents. Highlighting in boldface in right-hand column is mine for comparing ACTFL & CEFR common items. Underlining indicates a contrast pointing out a distinguishing element that separates the ACTFL & CEFR ratings, however close. **Boldface** in left-hand column indicates ACTFL term.

An initial draft of this document was presented at the GLSC Workshop at the German Consulate General, New York City, in November 2009. See <http://www.germanschools.org/Conference/2009/Program.htm>.

Modifications:

1) A few items, such as “spatial relationships” and “courtesy” at the Novice level, have been added where missing from ACTFL's literature but implied by the Novice descriptions. Similarly, any “Function” comments not in quotations are my interpretations.

2) Quantifying the number of items correlated with the Novice sublevels is my contribution, based on approximately 25 years of use of the OPI and its guidelines as well as discussions with other language professionals.

	<b>Content</b>	<b>Function</b>	<b>Accuracy &amp; characteristics</b>
NOVICES, in general	Categories: self, family relationships, basic objects, colors, clothing, weather, weekdays, months, numbers, date, time, food, spatial relationships, courtesy (minimal)	Western languages: narrate in present; express preferences; identify	Speak in words, not sentences, except where memorized. Cannot ask questions unless memorized. Do not normally self-correct.
<b>Novice Low</b>	Up to approximately five of the above categories. “[M]ay be able to exchange greetings, give their identity, and name a number of familiar objects”	Identify; express preferences; describe. Cannot ask questions unless memorized.	“no real functional ability,” “cannot therefore participate in a true conversational exchange”; “because of their pronunciation, they may be unintelligible”
<i>A1</i>	<i>“Very basic repertoire of words and simple phrases related to personal details and particular concrete situations.”</i>	<i>“Can ask and answer questions about personal details. Can interact in a simple way[,] but communication is totally dependent on repetition, rephrasing and repair.”</i>	<i>“Shows only limited control...in a memorised pattern.”</i>

	<b>Content</b>	<b>Function</b>	<b>Accuracy &amp; characteristics</b>
<b>Novice Mid</b>	Limited to approximately 2/3 of the following categories: self, family relationships, basic objects, colors, clothing, weather, weekdays, months, date, time, food, spatial relationships, courtesy (minimal)	Identify; express preferences; describe. Cannot ask questions unless memorized.	Often flawed. Speaks in words, not sentences, except where memorized. Cannot ask questions unless memorized. “communicate minimally and with difficulty”; “pause frequently”; “recycle their own and their interlocutor’s words”; “words from native language”; “silence.” Speakers “may be understood with great difficulty even by sympathetic interlocutors accustomed to dealing with non-natives”
<i>A1</i>	<i>“Very basic repertoire of words and simple phrases related to personal details and particular concrete situations.”</i>	<i>“Can ask and answer questions about personal details. Can interact in a simple way[,] but communication is totally dependent on repetition, rephrasing and repair.”</i>	<i>“Shows only limited control...in a memorised pattern.”</i>
<b>Novice High</b> (Foreign Service Institute level 0+)	Can express needs in all or nearly all of the above categories.	Identify, express preferences, describe. Can ask memorized questions. Can <b>occasionally</b> ask an original, intelligible question. May occasionally be able to state an event in the past tense	“mostly [...] short and sometimes incomplete sentences in the present” but “can sometimes respond in intelligible sentences” (“unsustainable”); “hesitant”; “inaccurate”; “expansions of learned material and stock phrases [...] may sometimes appear surprisingly fluent and accurate”; “first language may strongly influence their pronunciation, [...] vocabulary and syntax”; “can generally be understood by sympathetic interlocutors used to non-natives”
<i>A2</i>	<i>“Has a very basic repertoire of words and simple phrases related to personal details and particular concrete situations.”</i>	<i>“Can ask and answer questions about personal details.”</i>	<i>“words and simple phrases”; “can link words or groups of words” with “and” or “then”; “Uses some simple structures correctly, but still systematically makes basic mistakes”; “short utterances,” “pauses, false starts and reformulation”</i>

	<b>Content</b>	<b>Function</b>	<b>Accuracy &amp; characteristics</b>
INTER-MEDIATE speakers, in general	Almost all or all of the Novice content categories; numbers to 1,000; courtesy requirements; routine travel needs (directions, etc.); familiar topics can include basic work/study.	Questions & answers in words and sentences. Narrate in past and present. Some future (easy structures), language-dependent. Start and end a conversation.	Tend to be intelligible to sympathetic native speakers, especially those used to speaking with non-natives. Use short sentences as well as multiple words. Frequent errors. Minimal sociolinguistic capability.
<b>Intermediate Low</b> (FSI “1-”)	Almost all or all of the Novice content categories plus some of the Intermediate areas: familiar topics.	Can ask and answer simple questions, usually prompted. Uncomplicated tasks. Describe (see Content). Identify. Order food. Make simple purchases. Narrate in present and some past tense (high frequency irregular forms and the regular forms)	Recombine memorized materials with small “new” items. <u>Hesitant. Frequently search for forms.</u> Self-correct. Limited linking ability: equivalent of “and,” “or,” “then.” Can create some new sentences.
<i>A2, not yet B1</i>	<i>See A2 above. B1: Family, hobbies, interests, work, travel and current events</i>	<i>B1: Can initiate, maintain and close simple face-to-face conversation on topics that are familiar or of personal interest. (Typically, IL speakers do not initiate conversations. They are reactive.)</i>	<i>B1: “Has enough language to get by”; “circumlocutions”; “frequently used ‘routines’ and patterns” from “<b>predictable</b> situations”; “<u>Can keep going comprehensibly</u>” --Not typical until ACTFL Intermediate-High; “pausing”; “repair”; “Can repeat back part...”; Can link “shorter discrete simple elements into” a “sequence”</i>
<b>Intermediate Mid</b> (Foreign Service Institute level 1)	The Intermediate content above plus “daily activities, interests and personal preferences, as well as physical and social needs, such as [...] shopping, travel and lodging”;	Ask & answer questions “in straightforward social situations”; get information on “prices and services”; narrate in past and present with growing repertoire of verbs (still somewhat limited irregulars)	“Concrete”; longer sentences; “pauses, reformulations and self-corrections”; “... <b>predictable</b> and concrete exchanges”; “some difficulty linking ideas”; “inaccuracies in their vocabulary and/or pronunciation”; understandable by sympathetic native-speakers used to non-natives. “ <u>Intermediate-Mid speakers tend to function reactively</u> , for example, by responding to direct questions or requests for information.”
<i>A2, nearing B1</i>	<i>Family, hobbies, interests, work, travel and <u>current events</u></i>	<i>(See A2/B1 above)</i>	Differentiating B1 from Intermediate-Mids: B1’s “ <u>Can keep going comprehensibly</u> ”

	<b>Content</b>	<b>Function</b>	<b>Accuracy &amp; characteristics</b>
<b>Intermediate High</b> (FSI level 1+)	“[M]ost routine tasks and social situations of the Intermediate level.” “[B]asic information related to work, school, recreation, particular interests and areas of competence...” (No mention of “current events,” unlike B1.)	[N]arrate and describe in major time frames using connected discourse....”	“[H]andle tasks pertaining to the Advanced level, but...” unsustainable. Can connect sentences up to “paragraph length”, but break down because of lack of vocabulary, conjugations in appropriate tense or syntactic structures. “...[A]re able to <b>converse with ease and confidence</b> ” with “most routine tasks and social situations of the Intermediate level.” Cannot hypothesize, such as imperfect/conditional [French] or Konjunktiv II [German]. “[G]enerally...understood by native speakers unaccustomed to...non-natives....” Self-correct. Native-language interference “still evident.” Gaps.
<i>B1</i>	<i>Family, hobbies, interests, work, travel and <u>current events</u> (Typically, “recreational activities” area topic of the ACTFL advanced level.)</i>	<i>Can initiate, maintain and close simple face-to-face conversation on topics that are familiar or of personal interest.</i>	<i>“Uses reasonably accurately a repertoire of frequently used ‘routines’ and patterns” – predictable situations. “<b>Can keep going comprehensibly</b>”; “repair is very evident”</i>
ADVANCED			
<b>Advanced Low</b> (FSI level “2-”)	All the above plus: generic work requirements and most social situations including introductions. Current events.	“[N]arrate and describe in all major time frames (past, present, future). Ask and answer questions. Role play in a situation with a complication.	“paragraph length discourse, but control of aspect may be lacking at times.” “They can handle...unexpected turn of events...within...a routine situation....” <b>Rephrasing &amp; circumlocution at times.</b> “When pressed for a fuller account, they tend to grope....” Primarily generic vocabulary. Can “be understood by native speakers unaccustomed to dealing with non-natives...” but with some repetition and restatement.
<i>B2</i>	<i>All of the above plus “viewpoints on most general topics”</i>	<i>[G]ive clear descriptions, express viewpoints”; “initiate discourse”; takes turns, but “not always...elegantly.”</i>	<i>“[H]e/she can be hesitant as he/she searches for patterns and expressions”; “Shows a relatively high degree of grammatical control. Does not</i>

	<b>Content</b>	<b>Function</b>	<b>Accuracy &amp; characteristics</b>
		<i>Confirm comprehension; invite others in.</i>	<i>make errors which cause misunderstanding, and can correct most of his/her mistakes.” “stretches of language with a fairly even tempo” “few noticeably long pauses”</i>
<b>Advanced Mid</b> (FSI level 2)	“[C]oncrete topics relating to work, school, home, and leisure activities, as well as to events of current, public, and personal interest....”	Narrate and describe in all major time frames	“[H]andle with ease and confidence a large number of communicative tasks. “[C]onnecting, paragraph-length discourse”; circumlocution; handle complication “within the context of a routine situation”; substantial flow; “extensive vocabulary” (somewhat generic); lack ability “to provide structured argument” (defending an opinion)
<i>B2</i>	<i>“viewpoints on most general topics”</i>	<i>[G]ive clear descriptions, express viewpoints”; “initiate discourse”; takes turns, but “not always...elegantly.” Confirm comprehension; invite others in.</i>	<i>“Shows a relatively high degree of grammatical control. Does not make errors which cause misunderstanding, and can correct most of his/her mistakes.” “stretches of language with a fairly even tempo” “few noticeably long pauses”</i>
<b>Advanced High</b> (FSI level 2+)	“[C]oncrete topics relating to work, school, home, and leisure activities, as well as to events of current, public, and personal interest....” Some specialized language on particular topics of interest.	Hypothesize. Some defending an opinion.	“They can provide a structured argument to support their opinions, and they may construct hypotheses, but patterns of errors appear. They can discuss some topics abstractly...” of general interest and “special expertise.” “Precise vocabulary and intonation to express meaning”; Over a variety of topics, especially defending an argument, language will break down or they will “resort to simplification”
<i>B2+</i>	<i>“Has a sufficient range of language to be able to give clear descriptions, express viewpoints on most general topics”</i>	<i>[G]ive clear descriptions, express viewpoints”; “initiate discourse”; takes turns, but “not always...elegantly.”</i>	<i>“Can use a limited number of cohesive devices to link his/her utterances into clear, coherent discourse, though there may be some ‘jumpiness’ in a long</i>

	<b>Content</b>	<b>Function</b>	<b>Accuracy &amp; characteristics</b>
		<i>Confirm comprehension; invite others in.</i>	<i>contribution.”</i>
SUPERIOR			
<b>Superior</b>  (FSI level 3)	[T]heir interests and special fields of competence”; “complex matters in detail”; “such as social and political issues”	Explain Defend an opinion (argument) Construct hypotheses	“able to communicate in the language with accuracy and <b>fluency</b> in order to participate fully and effectively in conversations on a <b>variety of topics in formal and informal settings</b> from both concrete and abstract perspectives”; “virtually no pattern of error”; “sporadic errors”
<i>CI</i>	<i>“[W]ide range of general, academic, professional or leisure topics”</i>	<i>Preface remarks; “keep the floor”; “relate his/her own contributions skilfully to those of other speakers”</i>	<i>“Can express him/herself <b>fluently</b> and spontaneously.... Only a <b>conceptually difficult subject</b> can hinder a natural, smooth flow of language.” <b>Errors are rare</b>, difficult to spot and generally corrected when they do occur.” Does not have “...to restrict what he/she wants to say.”</i>