

Less Commonly Taught Languages

Why I Teach to the Test

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At the dawn of proficiency-based language testing in American academia, in the mid-1980s, I stood up at a presentation on Oral Proficiency Interviews and admitted that I teach to this test. I said that I taught OPI strategies explicitly. It was, I argued, a language teacher's duty to help students "beat the test." I was booed for advocating such subversive practices. After all, the ACTFL Proficiency Guidelines gave us for the first time a common yardstick for measuring language proficiency. It promised to usher in not only a uniform way of looking at language learners' progress but also a powerful motivator to change people's thinking about curricular planning, classroom pedagogy, and realistic expectations. Why would a teacher, especially a newly minted certified tester, work at cross-purposes to the test?

Thirty years later, I still teach to the test. Despite prevailing opinion to the contrary, scripts, spiels, and chunking play a large role in my prepping students for OPIs at both the Intermediate and Advanced levels. (I teach college Russian, and Superior is usually unreachable in the confines of a normal undergraduate program.)

The ACTFL Intermediate level requires creating with the language through recombinations of learned material (ACTFL, 2012). But in fact, nearly every required utterance at Intermediate Low is predictable. Recounting one's basic biography, interests, and hobbies is a spiel. The number of transactional situations is likewise limited and predictable. In addition to learning basic transactional scripts (e.g travel and food), students need to be taught explicitly how to start up conversations and close them, once they have run out of things to say. They need to practice "sticking to the script," that is saying what they can, and not what they can't. Moreover, they need to be aggressive in making sure that whatever language they have finds its way into an interview, even if that requires a bit of fibbing. (You forgot the word for "dog"? Congratulations, you now own a cat.) In any event, a student's impulse to answer a tester's question forthrightly is often counterproductive, one which reduces the examinee's floor time. After all, at the earliest stages, the ability to hold the floor, a measure of self-confidence, becomes more important than Truth.

Aggressive (read: successful) test-taking requires that students wrest away as much control over the conversation as they can muster. An OPI is not enhanced interrogation. It's a conversation. Students should be told to grab the tester's words and run with them. Consider the response of this student when asked where a foreign tourist in Washington could shop for clothes on the cheap. This response marked her crossing from Novice Mid to High:

Student: You said you need cheap clothes?

Tester: "Yes, I did."

Student: "Well, I can see you prefer cheap clothes."

Tester: "Why do you say that?"

Student: "Because I'm looking at your clothes now: you have a cheap shirt, cheap pants, and those shoes! Where do you shop for clothing? At Walmart?"

The Advanced level is supposed to be less scriptable. But OPIs are conducted in such a way that chunking is still a successful strategy for dealing with most of the interview. Students can be sure that they will be expected to produce some standard paragraphed spiels, such as a description of their jobs and leisure time, their future career plans, comparisons between college and high school, two colleges, two cities, a study-abroad location they have been in and home, the best or worst, or most interesting moment (in college or abroad.) Students can and should script these events and then play them out. (They cannot sound canned.) Even at the advanced level, less than half of the talk forces students into potentially unknown territory. Even situations with a complication are not infinite. Many can be planned for and practiced.

The mainstream of pedagogical thinking, encapsulated by Glisan and Donato (2004) objects to such widespread chunking practices at the Advanced level as suggested by Rifkin (2003, 2004) or at even higher levels (Shekhtman and Sibrina, 2005).

However, I would argue that teaching to the test (a) requires fairly tight scripting at Intermediate and some looser scripting at higher levels. Is this bad? To the extent that it helps L2 speakers hold the floor effectively, it mirrors certain behaviors of L1 speakers, albeit native speakers focus less on planning than L2 speakers. But the L1 speaker who is planning to ask the boss for a raise, complain about bad service, participate in a political debate, or break off a relationship that has run its course engages in precisely the strategy-planning that I ask of my students.

Strategizing about speaking before speaking is one leg of the path to successful communication, which is precisely what the oral proficiency interview is supposed to measure. In other words teaching students to beat the test is nothing more than teaching global communicative strategies. That's something we should all be trying to do. And if, as a side effect, the tester is fooled into assigning a "Mid" instead of a "Low," both the student and the teacher are to be lauded, not damned.

WORKS CITED

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