Appendix 8.1  OPI/ILR Scale Descriptions and Language Learning Activities


Note: Level 1=Intermediate; Level 2=Advanced; Levels 3-5=Superior
Over time, the ILR scale and the OPI, linked together since their inception, have expanded to include four skills, a system of plus levels, the varied testing needs of numerous organizations, and applications beyond testing.

**The Functional Trisection: Task, Content, Accuracy**

A key to the expanded use of the scale may be the ease with which the level descriptors can be analyzed in terms of task, content, and accuracy. In this analysis, “task” means what one can do with the language, “content” signifies what one can talk about/read about/listen to, and “accuracy” denotes how well one can use the language. Faculty can use this functional trisection to develop teaching practices from lessons learned in testing without distorting the original intention of the scale. Indeed, at DL/FLC, many newly trained testers leave OPI workshops with dozens of teaching ideas that do not compromise or replicate testing procedures.

**What Does the Scale Tell Us About Language Use?**

**Level 1**

Tasks. Reviewing Level 1 on the ILR scale, we find tasks connected to basic skills needed in everyday life. Level 1 speakers can introduce and identify themselves, exchange greetings and courtesy expressions, and satisfy predictable survival needs. They can also provide the most frequently requested biographical information and ask and answer simple questions. Level 1 listeners can understand simple questions and answers, statements, and directions. They can also understand very simple face-to-face conversations and get the main idea when survival topics related to immediate needs are discussed. Level 1 readers can comprehend very simple connected written material, such as highly predictable descriptions of people and places, or simplified explanations of geography, prose tailored for the ease of tourists would be an example. Level 1 writers can create statements and questions on very familiar topics and produce phone messages, notes, and excuses.

Content. The content associated with Level 1 in all four skills focuses on survival needs, such as obtaining food, lodging, or transportation or meeting everyday shopping needs. It also includes greetings, courtesy expressions, time, and uncomplicated directions.

Accuracy. Even native speakers accustomed to speaking with non-native speakers must do most of the work to communicate with Level 1s, who may, in turn, misunderstand some simple texts.

**Level 2**

Tasks. The descriptors state that Level 2 speakers can participate in extensive but casual conversations, ask and answer predictable questions in the workplace, give straightforward instructions, and make nonroutine changes in arrangements. Listeners can understand descriptions and narratives about current, past, and future events. They can understand factual material and routine conversations. They can also follow the essential points of discussions of their professional specialties. Readers can comprehend familiar, factual material. They can locate and understand the main idea and details in such prose and answer factual questions about descriptions and narration. Writing tasks at Level 2 include preparation of routine social correspondence and work-related documents. At this level, a person can write about everyday topics and current events on a limited basis.

Content. Content consists of concrete topics such as descriptions of people, places, and things. It will probably include job-related topics, family, personal background and interests, travel, and well-publicized current events. Such subjects normally follow a predictable sequence that facilitates comprehension.

Accuracy. At Level 2, linguistic structure is neither very elaborate nor thoroughly mastered. Errors are frequent. If there is some repetition and rewording, the Level 2 speaker can communicate with native speakers not accustomed to talking with non-native speakers.

**Level 3**

Tasks. Level 3 speakers can participate effectively in most conversations with native speakers—both formal and informal—on practical, social, and professional topics. They can answer objections, clarify points, justify decisions, and state and defend policy. Level 3 speakers have the language skills to conduct meetings and briefings. Level 3 listeners can understand discourse based on hypothesis and supported opinion. They can follow the essentials of conversations between educated native speakers and understand all forms of speech related to their professional specialties. In addition, Level 3s can detect emotional overtones of speech and grasp implied information. Readers can comprehend authentic material on unfamiliar subjects; in other words, they can “read to learn.” They can also interpret and relate ideas and read between the lines.

Writing tasks at Level 3 will include reports, summaries, papers on current events, and documents on professional specialties.

Content. Content includes argumentation, hypothesis, and supported opinions on a wide range of subjects. Abstract language and topics can be dealt with easily at Level 3.

Accuracy. There will be some imperfections, but errors virtually never interfere with understanding and rarely disrupt the native speaker. However, the Level 3 listener may not always understand native speakers talking very rapidly and using slang or dialect.
Level 4

Tasks. Level 4 speakers can tailor their speech and set the tone when communicating with a wide range of audiences. They can counsel, persuade, and play an effective role among native speakers during conferences, negotiations, lectures, and debates. They can advocate a position on a wide variety of topics and speak in sophisticated and complex ways.

Content. Content includes all styles and forms of the language pertinent to professional and social needs. Editorial, conjectural, and literary texts on any subject matter directed to general reader can be understood.

Curriculum. Language ability rarely benders performance of any task. While the individual would seldom be perceived as native, he or she uses the language with a high degree of effectiveness, reliability, and precision.

Level 5

Tasks. Functionally equivalent to a highly articulate well-educated native, the Level 5 speaker can perform all tasks accomplished by such people in countries where the language is natively spoken. The Level 5 listener can comprehend extremely difficult and abstract concepts and understand how natives think as they create discourse. The reader's control of both contemporary and classical texts is equivalent to that of the well-educated but non-native native.

Content. Content includes all forms and styles intelligible to the well-educated native, including extremely abstract speech as well as highly colloquial speech and regionalisms. Written texts include general legal and technical documents, highly colloquial writing, and literary texts including contemporary grand-gaude poetry and prose.

Curriculum. Speech is fully accepted as equivalent to that of a well-educated native listener or reader.

Language Learning Activities Related to the ILR Scale

As noted, language teachers trained to conduct OPs according to the ILR scale very often create their own classroom applications. The functional instruction readily suggests ideas for tasks and content, with the accuracy statements adding possible scoring approaches. The next section presents some teaching ideas for each skill at the base levels.

Level 1

Speaking. Students work in pairs to create a conversation in which they exchange greetings, introduce themselves, and ask each other for personal information such as home towns, size of families, and hobbies. They later report on their conversations to other people.

Listening. Students identify the main idea of a simple conversation between two other people.

Reading. Students skim an assigned text to identify the main points and then fill in a grid related to those points, for example, the grid may have headings for dates, locations, and weather conditions.

Writing. A student writes a note to another student stating when and where they will meet.

Level 2

Speaking. Students engage in role-playing activities in which they have to make extensive changes to travel and hotel reservations with uncooparative native speakers.

Listening. Students take notes and use them to prepare summaries of a factual conversation between two native speakers.

Reading. Students read a factual text and complete a chart by filling in predetermined categories (e.g., “Good News” and “Bad News”).

Writing. Students write a short letter narrating the sequence of events by which they were able to organize a surprise party for a friend.

Level 3

Speaking. Students participate in a debate, arguing presupposed points of view on a potentially controversial topic such as using software to pirate music through the Internet.

Listening. Students listen to a conversation between two native speakers and complete a chart indicating (1) the facts expressed, (2) the attitude of each speaker toward the subject, and (3) what is likely to happen after the conversation is over.

Reading. Students read an argumentative text, such as a serious newspaper editorial, and distinguish between ideas that are factual and those that are opinion. They demonstrate which words and phrases support these conclusions.

Writing. Students write an argumentative essay comparing and contrasting the views of those who support limitations on minors’ access to the Internet with those who believe this violates the Constitutional guarantee of freedom of speech.

Levels 4 and 5

Overview. The DUFLC has had more experience with testing than teaching at the native and near-native levels.
Classroom instruction generally drops out of the picture at this point, as learners themselves determine how much they want their skills to become.

Because Level 3s normally interact well with natives and demonstrate a very high degree of accuracy, they receive little negative feedback about their language. Only a subset of Level 3s is likely to pursue further language training.

**Speaking.** Students participate in role-playing situations requiring tailoring and register shifts. Videotaped review of the role-plays is followed by specific feedback from the teacher and, perhaps, other native speakers, with particular emphasis on sociolinguistic appropriateness. Comparisons are made between student performance and tapes of well-educated natives in similar situations.

**Listening.** Those aspiring to near-native levels of fluency comprehend discourse on varieties of the target language beyond the classroom standard. For example, they listen to speakers of major dialects and regional variations, the slang of young people, job-specific jargon, and the conversation of people from all strata of society.

The teacher guides the student through this unfamiliar linguistic territory by assigning tasks such as summarizing or paraphrasing portions of discourse.

**Reading.** As texts at higher levels become increasingly individualized in style, point of view and content, they present challenges even to well-educated native readers. Joining a formal reading group that includes both native and tentative readers can bring fresh insights into authors' intentions as well as help in recognizing nuances.

**Writing.** Extended simulations that require a group to create a new business or establish a parliamentary or legal system for an imaginary country provide an opportunity to work on purposeful writing and other skills. Students might find it even more stimulating to serve on a real project alongside native-speaking members of a charitable or humanitarian group. Simulations or projects closely related to individual interests may motivate those striving toward the highest levels to improve their proficiency in all four skills.

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