

**We Teach Languages Episode 98: OPI, the Proficiency Levels, and Expectations for Student Performance**

**with Ellen Toubman and Ryan Rockaitis**

**Stacey Johnson**:  [00:00] This is "We Teach Languages," a podcast about language teaching from the diverse perspectives of teachers.

[00:09] [background music]

**Stacey**:  [00:12] I'm Stacey Johnson. Today, on episode 98, I'm so excited to introduce Ellen Toubman and Ryan Rockaitis, who will discuss ACTFL's proficiency guidelines and the Oral Proficiency Interview, which you'll hear Ellen and Ryan call the OPI.

[00:32] These two teachers are both experienced and accomplished language teachers. I'm really excited that they are participating in the podcast today. In addition to what you'll hear them say about themselves, check out the show notes to learn more about them and to find lots of links related to the OPI.

[00:51] With that introduction from me, here's Ellen and Ryan.

[00:56] [music]

**Ellen Toubman**:  [01:00] My name is Ellen Toubman. I'm currently the Head of the World Language Department in Medfield. I've been teaching Spanish for over 30 years. I teach high school Spanish, mostly 12th graders, sometimes 11th graders. I also oversee the program in our district, which starts in the second grade.

[01:19] We're here to talk a little bit about the OPI, MOPI training, and what it's done for us in terms of our teaching and how it's affected us in our careers. Ryan is going to introduce himself.

**Ryan Rockaitis**:  [01:32] My name is Ryan Rockaitis. I live in Chicago, Illinois. I am also a high school Spanish teacher. This is my 21st year teaching Spanish at the high school level. For the past several years, I have been involved with profession development through ACTFL. That's how I got to meet Ellen a few years ago.

[01:52] For the past several years, I have been teaching AP Spanish Language and Culture, and Spanish II, which is mostly freshman in my school.

**Ellen**:  [02:02] How did you get started working with ACTFL, Ryan, and OPI? What's your backstory?

**Ryan**:  [02:07] For several years, I've heard people talk about the proficiency levels and going to conferences. People talk about their goals for people would be novice, intermediate, or advanced, kind of was able to wrap my mind around it, but I wasn't sure if I really understood what the different proficiency levels meant.

[02:31] I'm a member of ICTFL of the Illinois Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages. Several years ago, we brought a four‑day OPI workshop to Illinois. At that point, I had already been teaching probably 14 years. I had never spent so much time just thinking about proficiency.

[02:49] We spent four days with like‑minded colleagues just thinking about what does proficiency really mean, what do we really want the students to be able to do after their time with us. It got me thinking about how you can be more intentional with some of the things that I was doing in my classroom.

[03:06] I didn't totally change the way I taught. I didn't totally change any of my beliefs about learning languages but it helped be more intentional and more specific about some of the goals I had for my students.

[03:18] After attending the four‑day workshop, I was thinking about so many different things related to the workshop that I went ahead to become an OPI tester. After going through that process, I eventually became a trainer. For the past several years, I have been facilitating workshops on Oral Proficiency Interview and some of ACTFL's other workshops.

[03:39] For you, Ellen, how did you hear about the MOPI training, and what made you attend it?

**Ellen**:  [03:44] In terms of OPI, I think I first heard about OPI...I don't even know how long ago, a very long time ago. I think I knew people that had to take OPIs for various reasons. I thought it was a pretty cool concept. Probably, I don't know, maybe seven or eight years ago, I went to a session at Massachusetts Foreign Language Association Conference or MFL Conference.

[04:07] It was a woman who did a session about how teaching the structure of a class can be somewhat like an OPI. My interest was piqued a little bit. I don't think anywhere along the way I've drastically changed anything. It's all been a process, bits and pieces.

[04:25] I did another MFL‑sponsored proficiency academy three years ago, I guess, it would be now, where we spent a whole week talking about proficiency and the proficiency movement, and how to reset our perspective on what we teach, how we teach it. A lot of people were talking about the different levels. I feel like I left there knowing that I needed to know what the levels were.

[04:53] I wanted to know what the ACTFL levels were, but I was like I don't think I really know what they are.

[04:58] [laughter]

**Ryan**:  [04:59] Exactly.

**Ellen**:  [05:01] People had told me, people had explained it to me, and we did do some reading but I didn't quite know.

[05:06] The following summer, that was the summer that I met you, I became very interested in trying to find a MOPI workshop. Lo and behold, there was one in Connecticut, which is where I grew up, and my backdoor. I decided to sign up for it. That's where I became interested in the MOPI or the OPI Interview. A little bit more hands‑on, I learned a lot in the two days.

[05:33] Wasn't necessarily going to go on with the certification but when I spoke with you, I remember you saying, "This would be a great way if you really feel like you want to dive in a little deeper and extend your own knowledge."

[05:48] It wasn't like I was planning to go out and do a whole bunch of interviews, but that I could. I also felt like in my position as a department chair, it would be a great skill to have to help placing kids in different classes and to get a gauge on where our teachers are in the different classes in our school as well.

[06:10] I was also undergoing all the tasks of rewriting how we describe their classes trying to use the levels to describe them better instead of saying, "This is Spanish I, or Spanish II, or Mandarin I, or Mandarin II, these are the kinds of can‑dos that the novice high should be able to do."

[06:32] We want our students to be at the novice high or intermediate low level at the end of this year, and our targets and all of that. It's pretty hard to describe a target and to make it so that somebody else understands what it is if you don't really know what it is. That was my motivation.

**Ryan**:  [06:49] Something which I think I heard you say was that going through the MOPI training really helps you set realistic expectations for your students because like you said we throw these terms around novice, intermediate, advanced. What does that really mean?

[07:05] When we look at the criteria on paper, for example, at the advanced level, advanced speakers need to narrate in past, present, and future time. You might say, "Oh yeah, my students do that." To what extent do they do that? How consistently do they do that? What does that actually sound like?

[07:21] Over the workshop, you can listen to lots of examples over the course of your training that you did for your certification, you hear lots of interviews, and you start to make sense of what does it mean to be advanced, or novice, or intermediate.

[07:33] To me, it really helped me set realistic expectations to realize that if they can't do everything at a certain level at a certain time, that's probably OK, even though I'm working towards those goals and even though I'm always working towards the next level.

**Ellen**:  [07:48] I'd also think that the actual time‑on training after the workshop, after the groundwork was quite out there for me but going through and being on the website and listening to samples and rating them, and then finding out, "Oh, I was a little off here because of this criteria," or, "I was a right on here because of this criteria."

[08:10] Almost self‑calibrating throughout that process with the help of the website obviously was a piece of it that solidified my understanding of the levels.

**Ryan**:  [08:21] We both are Spanish teachers. Both teach at the high school level. One of the things that I am always interested in is articulation from K‑16‑plus articulatory. We all benefit from having conversation across levels.

[08:37] I am curious, in your role as the head of the department, how has some of your understanding of proficiency through the workshop...how has that affected your work with some of the instruction at the lower levels?

**Ellen**:  [08:51] I think that in our elementary program, we don't meet as often as we'd like. The classes meet twice a week all the way through until they get to the middle school.

[09:03] I think it helped me help my teachers understand what were reasonable goals for our kids and that for them to be expecting kids to be coming out with lots of narration or lots of full sentences was just not something that would be realistic, but that they can actually make some really substantial progress with the language, given the right tools.

[09:29] It also has made me look into comprehensible input a lot more and helping teachers understand that their goals can be reasonable and the kids can be observing lots and lots of language from a lot of different sources the whole time.

[09:46] We actually did some sampling in some of our department meetings. Last year when I was going through the process, we used the English samples just to help people in our department gauge and understand where their students would/could be in the different levels.

**Ryan**:  [10:04] One of my favorite moments in the MOPI workshop is when we listen to some of the novice samples. We'll watch some clips and then we listen to and watch some full novice interviews. A novice interview might be 10 minutes. It's not that long. There might not be a lot of target language production.

[10:22] After we watch the interview, I ask the participants, if these were your students and you just came back to class and said, "I just did my OPI Interview, how did I do?" We brainstorm all of the things that we could say that this person did well, even at the novice level. I think [inaudible] .

[10:38] Even though we might say other person is a novice, they haven't met all the criteria of intermediate, but what are other things a novice can do? Things like you're able to stay in a conversation for 10 minutes. That's something we need to recognize and acknowledge in reward.

[10:55] You understood the questions. Maybe you couldn't always answer them, but you understood the questions. That makes me think of my practice, "Am I rewarding their comprehension?"

[11:07] You're able to produce some lists. You're able to give some cognates. You're able to tell me some personal things about your family. Sure, maybe it was at the novice level. Maybe you only used words. Maybe you only used a few isolated words.

[11:19] Just focusing on the communication, which I think for us is the heart of proficiency, that you're actually able to communicate meaningful things. It's going to look different at different levels, but just always putting that emphasis on communicating things that are actually meaningful and part of your life.

**Ellen**:  [11:36] One of the aha moments for me was when listening to a novice speaker, was thinking to myself, "Wow. It's only words, but it's words that are appropriate for the situation."

[11:51] There's a comprehension going on there. I know that that person is right in the middle of the novice level because they're understanding and replying in appropriate way.

**Ryan**:  [12:04] Then, even though somebody is at the novice level, we're always working towards their next level. Intermediate speakers need to be able to ask questions as well as answer them.

[12:13] When I invented my OPI workshop years ago, one of the first changes I made in my classroom was making sure that I'm having the students ask more questions and giving them space to create the questions that they want to have answered.

[12:27] I remember, one of my first changes was we had a unit about things around school and things in their typical day. I had some questions for them to practice, but then I had them come up with questions. Question I will never forget.

[12:41] One of the questions that they wanted to talk about was, "When do you go to the bathroom?"

**Ellen**:  [12:46] [laughs]

**Ryan**:  [12:47] For me, as a high school teacher, I would never walk in and have that on my lesson plan, "Well, today, I'm going to ask the kids when they go to the bathroom," but that was the hottest topic of conversation for the year.

[13:00] Some of them would say, "I go on this class." Someone else would say about, "He let you go on that class? He doesn't let me go on that class. I have to run because my teacher doesn't let me go to the bathroom. I have this class here and that class there."

[13:12] Even though they were working towards that intermediate skill, their questions and answers were by no means "perfect," it was something they wanted to talk about. It was something that they came up with.

[13:23] They were creating with the language, making it meaningful. It's all because I got out of the way and let them come up with the questions they wanted to talk about.

**Ellen**:  [13:31] That's interesting. Asking questions was one of the first things I added into my classes last year after doing the MOPI workshop and starting the training. What I did was I had sort of a warm‑up, most days, built into my class plan where I would have...This was in the AP language class.

[13:51] I would have somebody share something, just anything about the day before. They would have come in, and I'd say, "OK. Whose turn is it to share today?" I'd have somebody tell a quick story about something, anything.

[14:04] Then I said, "OK, you guys, now it's time to ask the person questions." They would go around the room and just ask questions about whatever it was. We got some really funny stories.

[14:13] We got one about a lost kitten. They renamed it, and then it ran away to somebody else's house. They enjoyed it because it was something that they cared about.

**Ryan**:  [14:23] They can do that at any level with the proper support. Just today, I have two classes of Spanish II. They have secret friends in the other classes. We've been doing this for weeks, and they still don't know who the person is, but they write to someone in the other class. They just write back and forth.

[14:38] I'm always pushing them to create the language, to write things that are actually meaningful to them and because they write to the same person. Right now, I think it's been about four or five weeks that my Spanish II kids they have to say something different.

[14:53] If I were writing to someone different every day or I were talking to someone different every day, I could ask the same questions that I did yesterday and I'm not pushing myself.

[15:01] The fact that now they're probably on three or four pages back and forth that they're writing. They have to think of something different to say if they want it to be an engaging activity.

[15:10] The hot topic today was, I said, "Think about questions that you really might want to hear the answer to." This one boy wrote in Spanish, "Is a hot dog a sandwich?" That was 10 minutes of conversation.

[15:25] Some people said, "Yes, it's a sandwich." Then we talked about, "What's the definition of a sandwich?" Again, these were my Spanish II students. By no means were their sentences "perfect," but they were engaged in a conversation about something that they wanted to talk about.

**Ellen**:  [15:40] That's awesome and meaningful conversation.

**Ryan**:  [15:44] With their vegetarian Spanish teacher.

[15:45] [laughter]

**Ellen**:  [15:45] It could have been a vegetarian hot dog.

**Ryan**:  [15:49] That's true. I think one of my other takeaways that was something very eye‑opening to me, and I also try to share in the workshops that I facilitate, is I think it's important to note the difference between proficiency and performance.

[16:05] Whether it's the OPI or the MOPI, it's the oral proficiency interview. We're focusing on proficiency, what you can do spontaneously, how you can communicate meaningful information in a spontaneous way as opposed to performance which is prepared.

[16:22] As good teachers, of course, we prepare our students for the assessments. We're not going to spend a whole unit talking about food and then give them an assessment on transportation, which we try to set them up for success.

[16:35] It's also realizing that that's performance. Proficiency is what they can do spontaneously, knowing that the production of language, it could look significantly different whether it's a spontaneous task or something you've been working towards as a class.

**Ellen**:  [16:52] I had heard of different students scoring certain ways on the Apple. I was like, "But that can't be that person's proficiency level. I don't think." Now I understand that that means that that's the level that they performed on a certain task.

**Ryan**:  [17:09] Right. It's not uncommon to hear people say, "That can't be his proficiency level because on the test we did last week, he was able to do X, Y, and Z." I think the test that you specifically prepared them for, for the last three weeks, he did a little bit better on that than the spontaneous question I asked them.

[17:28] Of course, that's going to look different. Like you said, the whole name of the assessment is the Assessment of Performance toward Proficiency. It's spontaneous in the fact that they don't know the questions they are going to be asked, but that they're topics that they probably have prepared in their classes.

[17:46] An analogy we use at the MOPI workshop is the metaphor of a tree for the different parts of proficiency. We say, "The trunk of the tree is the function." What can you actually do with the language?"

[17:57] For example, the novice level, you can list things. At intermediate, you can ask questions as one other functions. Advanced is narration and multiple timeframes. There are other functions that go along with each level.

[18:11] If you focus on the function, if you're working towards advanced, for example, what are the functions that you associate with that? You can be working on those functions in multiple contexts.

[18:22] Even at the AP level, you're talking about different themes. You're talking about real‑world connections, but if you have in the mind what are the functions that you need to get from one level to the next, you can work on that.

[18:33] I was working with middle school teachers one time. They were on board with proficiency, and they wanted to make sure they were being as intentional as possible. They wanted to make sure they were doing the best they could.

[18:45] They had these aha moments about proficiency, and they said, "Well, we're doing a unit on animals. The kids love this unit on animals. Should we still do the unit on animals?"

[18:54] I said, "Sure. Do the unit on animals. Have them ask questions about animals. Have them create with language around animals. Have them make meaning connections to animals. Then they said, "Oh, but we also hold the food unit. We can't get rid of the food unit. Should we do the food unit? Still, does that work with this level?"

[19:08] I said, "Sure. Do the food unit. Have them ask questions about food. Have them make personal connections with food. Have them talk about their daily life with food."

[19:16] Whatever topic you find meaningful and important, it's just what you do with that topic that helps you get from one level to the next.

**Ellen**:  [19:23] Yup. I totally agree. Merging into another topic that I think is one that is good to clarify. I know for me ‑‑ even though it had been explained to me a bunch of times, definitely at the Proficiency Academy ‑‑ the whole concept of the levels novice, intermediate, and advanced.

[19:42] In high school, I'd say a lot of our students are in the intermediate range which is a broad range in my opinion. Obviously, there's also some novices, too. The whole concept of the highest level of say novice being more like the intermediate. The highest level of the intermediate being more like the advanced. I think for me going through the training definitely solidified that for me in my head.

[20:11] If you could talk about that a little bit? How that works into figuring out where a speaker comes out in the proficiency levels. I think that would be interesting and clarifying for people.

**Ryan**:  [20:24] I think this is one of those topics that is a prime example of how...From my experience, my first time being in the workshop was the four‑day OPI workshop. It really took those four days for me to wrap my mind around all these different levels. Then going on, listening to multiple interviews after that, and the certification process.

[20:45] I don't think a brief explanation will do it justice to just hear interview after interview after interview. I think the key concept you are referencing is the idea that for each major level we have the different sub‑levels.

[20:59] For example, intermediate there's intermediate low, intermediate mid, intermediate high. Once you understand what intermediate means. Well, what does it mean to be intermediate low, mid or high?

[21:11] For example, intermediate high is really saying that you function at the advanced level most of the time, but there is sometimes when you can't sustain the production of the language at that level. When I give the workshop, people probably think I'm a broken record. I keep saying [Spanish] consistently. What can they do consistently throughout the level?

[21:34] Is it if we hear some advanced language? Is it just a few little moments of advanced where we get really excited because we hear a few sentences that sound like advanced language? Or are they consistently performing at advanced over the interview? That's why the interviews they can be 20 minutes up to half‑an‑hour of language production because we given them one topic. We talk about it. Another topic, another topic.

[21:59] We see what they can do consistently. What they can do consistently is their level. If they are performing at the advanced level most of the time, but there are a few moments when there's a little dip, then that's what we would call intermediate high. Really for me personally, started to click after just listening to interview after interview.

[22:21] Then having that aha moment saying, "Oh, that's what consistently means. Oh, that's what intermediate high is as opposed to advanced low." Somebody is listening today and is thinking, "Hmm, this sounds intriguing. I'd like to explore these proficiency levels a little bit more. I'd like to understand this a little bit more deeply." Any suggestions on how to wrap one's brain around this idea of proficiency?

**Ellen**:  [22:49] Well, I mean I do think the workshop is great. I know not everybody can get to one or afford one. The website that ACTFL has with the samples on it is open. As a teacher, at least I do start thinking about the different classes and how the kids are producing language by proficiency level rather than by, "Oh, this is Spanish II." Or, "Oh, this is Spanish III or Spanish IV."

[23:14] Some kids in the same class will have different levels obviously. That's the way it should be because people acquire languages at different paces.

**Ryan**:  [23:25] To share that with students, I use ACTFL has a great document of the [inaudible] in the workplace, which I know you can access through the ACTFL website. It shows each level, it shows the characteristics of each level. Then it shows different jobs that are associated with each proficiency level. It goes all the way up to superior.

[23:51] Even though I'm not expecting my freshmen to be at superior by the time they leave me, I like to show them that that's where they're heading. That they set those goals for themselves. I ask them at the beginning of the year. These are the proficiency levels. This is what they mean. What is your goal for life?

[24:08] In Illinois, we offer the Seal of Biliteracy at intermediate high, but I tell them that it's a milestone but it's not the finish line. [laughs] You might work really hard for your four years in high school and you might get that Seal of Biliteracy, you get that seal on your diploma, which is great. It's a great milestone, but you're just getting to that sweet spot.

**Ellen**:  [24:27] Massachusetts is embracing the Seal of Biliteracy as well as we speak. I think that document is great. It's also a good thing that could be shared with a parent night or something like that as well for parents to understand what it is we're doing with these levels.

**Ryan**:  [24:43] The bottom line is that the more conversations we have, like you said, with parents, with our students, with colleagues, we can all work together to give our students the language proficiency skills that will really help them lead with languages.

**Ellen**:  [24:55] Perfect. That's what we end on, Ryan. [laughs]

**Ryan**:  [24:59] Drop the microphone.

[25:00] [laughter]

[25:00] [music]

**Stacey**:  [25:04] We would love to hear your feedback on this topic. You can reach out to us on social media. We're on Twitter and Facebook @weteachlang or on our website, weteachlang.com. You can also send us an email, weteachlang@gmaill.com or send us a voicemail or text message to our Google Voice number (629)888‑3398.

[25:28] [background music]

**Stacey**:  [25:33] We want to especially thank the PEARLL Foreign Language Resource Center who has partnered with the podcast to provide transcripts and other resources for the episodes. You can learn more about PEARLL and see everything they have to offer by going to pearll.nflc.umd.edu. Thanks so much for listening. Bye‑bye.

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