Achieving advanced oral proficiency by Intermediate Chinese learners through a proficiency-guided curriculum

Miao-Fen Tseng
University of Virginia

Since their initial release in 1982, the Proficiency Guidelines and Oral Proficiency Interview created by ACTFL (American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages) have had a tremendous impact on foreign language instruction and have gradually become an organizing principle well recognized by foreign language educators. They have enjoyed widespread use in many foreign language programs and will continue to prevail and shape foreign language instruction in the United States in the foreseeable future.

The persistence and expansion of the impact of the OPI guidelines may be driven by a pedagogical shift from accuracy to fluency with speaking and communication being the central role to fulfill communicative functions. While no other accessible evaluation measures concurrent with pedagogical changes were available in the 1980’s, the OPI guidelines provided an operational model for language assessment. With the flourishing of OPI-governed curriculum, speech samples collected through the OPI measure then constitute a rich data basis for researchers. Consequently, the oral proficiency guidelines “seem to have [their] legitimacy in the arenas of policy, program development, and classroom instruction” (Liskin-Gasparro, 2003, p. 489).

Despite their continued and growing popularity, the measurement properties of the hierarchy of the guidelines have sparked lively criticism mostly concerning validity and reliability claims for the OPI (e.g., Bachman, 1990; Thompson, 1995; Lazaraton, 1996). The claims have been taken into consideration in the 1999 version. Therefore, “future reports of reliability in professional journals will only increase user confidence in the ACTFL OPI’s reliability” (Malone, 2003, p. 495). Although endeavors in empirical research are still critically needed to support the interpretations and practices of the OPI measure (Chalhoub-Deville & Fulcher, 2003), it is believed that the OPI measure is “an invaluable means of motivating students to work toward development of conversational skills” (Meredith, 1990, p. 295). Omaggio (1986) even declares that in light of the ACTFL’s guidelines, “teachers can amend their expectations for students’ linguistic and communicative development” (p. 35).

The purpose of the study

The OPIs investigated in research mainly focus on French, German, Russian, and Spanish, whereas work that looks into the OPIs in less-commonly taught languages is still in scarcity. This study aims to demonstrate how ACTFL guidelines affect the curriculum design of a second year Chinese language course offered for non-heritage learners. After implementing the guidelines into the curriculum for one academic year, seventy-five percent of the learners attained the advanced level for their oral proficiency. Such a goal, to my knowledge, is usually set for a third year Chinese language course or even higher in the majority of the Chinese Language Programs in the United States. To better our understanding of how and why this can be achieved by a group of second year learners, this paper will delineate the curriculum of the course and summarize the results of a survey concerning the learners’ experience and retrospections.

Subjects and OPI ratings

Twenty non-heritage learners took Intermediate Chinese in the academic year of 2003 at the University of Virginia. They were placed in two separate sections, with ten in each. Although four learners officially audited the course, they did not participate in the study as they were not required to complete assigned tasks in class and after class.

Of the twenty learners, one student had a learning disability, and one had difficulty with listening and speaking for unknown reasons. Fifteen learners spoke American English as their native language, while five were born in Korea and spoke Korean as their native language. The ethnic backgrounds of the fifteen learners who spoke American English as their native language had a mixture of the west and east. Seven subjects were Anglo-Saxon Americans, four had little exposure of Mandarin Chinese although either of their parents spoke Mandarin Chinese or Cantonese, and four learners’ parents were immigrants from Vietnam or Thailand.

Upon completing first year Chinese, each individual student had an Oral Proficiency Interview with the instructor, a certified tester. The OPI ratings were double-rated by another certified tester and reached 90% reliability. The small discrepancy resulted in further discussions between the two testers. Consequently, the OPI scores of the twenty learners ranged from Novice-mid to Intermediate-mid: one Novice-mid, three Novice-high, fourteen Intermediate-low, and two Intermediate-mid. Eighty percent of the learners were able to achieve the intermediate level upon the completion of the first year Chinese language course. When the same learners completed second year Chinese, the same procedure was repeated.
The initial interrater’s reliability was arrived at 85%, which brought about further discussions between the two certified testers and reached a final consensus. The OPI ratings ranged from Intermediate-low to Advanced-mid: one Intermediate-low, one Intermediate-mid, three Intermediate-high, twelve Advanced-low, and three Advanced-mid. Seventy-five percent of second year learners reached the advanced level upon the completion of the course.

An Introduction of the Course
The course totaled 150 contact hours, with five contact hours per week and fifteen weeks of instruction in each semester. Different aspects of the course were carefully considered and implemented to maximize overall effectiveness of instruction, including the goals and requirements of the course, the intensity of daily and weekly structures, the frequent oral interaction between the instructor and learners, the development of learning materials, the innovation of a Chinese Volunteer Language Program, and the assessment of performance.

The Goal of the Course
The major goal of this course was to help students attained proficiency in four language skills through constant practice in learned grammar, sentence patterns, phrases, and expressions. Students were expected to achieve communicative functions to appropriately describe, narrate, explain, and compare on a variety of informal topics centering on daily life, social issues of general interest, and aspects of Chinese culture at the paragraph and even discourse level. "Integrated Chinese" was used as a textbook supplemented by additional materials.

Daily and Weekly Structure of the Course
The course was constructed in a three-week cycle in which the first two weeks consisted of teaching two new lessons and the third week was the review week. In the review week, all previous learned materials were spirally reviewed, high-frequency linguistic errors and inappropriateness were illuminated, and additional materials that helped the students strengthen and extend their linguistic and cultural scope were incorporated into the curriculum. Homework and quizzes were also completed on a daily basis as outlined below.

Monday: dictation quiz + the first half of the text + a composition due
Tuesday: dictation quiz + the second half of the text + character writing homework due
Wednesday: grammar review + text reading + listening comprehension homework due
Thursday: oral practice + grammar homework due
Friday: oral performance + integrated activities

Frequent Oral Interaction
Oral interaction between the instructor and students was continual and occupied a central role. Oral activities were mostly spent on teacher-to-student interaction instead of student-to-student interaction. The original form of the Communicative Approach requires students to get involved in the negotiation of meanings either between the instructor and students or among students. In this class, negotiation of meaning mostly took place between the instructor and students, but not between students, to ensure the quality of input and to maximize the amount of appropriate and accurate feedback. Immediate feedback was given to students frequently every day; therefore students were accustomed to it and were not afraid of making mistakes.

Learning Materials
In addition to the Workbook that included exercises for listening, speaking, reading, and writing, two major types of handouts were created to supplement it: 1) grammar notes written from the perspectives of pedagogical grammar, and 2) oral questions that elicited responses from single sentences to a string of well-connected speech at the paragraph and even discourse level. During the review week, additional handouts were created to synthesize common errors and to supplement the two lessons taught. The oral questions listed on the handout determined the content of in-class oral practice and also served as a guideline for the preparation of weekly oral performance. The topics of weekly compositions also centered upon the oral questions based on which thoughts were organized and extended for each lesson.

The Chinese Volunteer Language Program
To increase students’ opportunities to interact with native speakers of Mandarin Chinese, an innovative approach was incorporated into the curriculum. Each student met with their assigned native speaker for weekly meetings for at least one and a half hours. The Chinese Volunteer Language Program was successfully launched for recruiting volunteers who were willing to help non-heritage students of Mandarin Chinese improve their Chinese on a weekly basis. It resembled the Volunteer Program of Learning English as a Second Language at the University of Virginia. The volunteer provided
assistance in proofreading the student’s compositions and helped prepare weekly oral performance quizzes and whatever was needed for each individual student.

**Assessment of Performance**

In addition to daily quizzes that culminated to a weekly quiz outlined earlier, a mid-term was administered to students at the end of the review week. The mid-term always included both the oral part and the written part. The oral mid-term included oral presentation or questions and answers. The written part included both writing in the sentential level and paragraph (or even discourse) level based on the following categories in order: 1) reading comprehension 2) filling in blanks 3) answering questions by using the given phrases or grammatical structure, 4) translation 5) completing a dialogue, answering essay questions, or composing by using key words, patterns, or guided questions provided. The first three categories were completed in class on Fridays, and the remaining two categories were completed at home.

**The Discussions of the Survey**

Of the twenty students, fifteen students volunteered to complete a questionnaire concerning their experience with learning the language after completing Intermediate Chinese. The major part of the questionnaire was composed of free-response, open-ended questions in order to collect as much information as possible. It should be noted that in calculating the responses through percentage, the questionnaire’s utilization of the free-response method sometimes did not allow for an exact total of 100%. Many of the responses between students overlapped, and individual respondents might have provided multiple responses or choices. Had the students been provided with a multiple choice questionnaire, the results would have totaled exactly 100% for all items, but they would not have had the opportunity to respond as liberally and honestly. The percentage reported in this study was calculated according to the formula that the total number of occurrence of a certain response or choice was divided by the total number of respondents, but not divided by the total number of responses or choices.

During the week when a new lesson was taught, the students spent a great deal of time completing Chinese work after class, ranging from six to twenty hours per week, and on average a total of 8.133 hours per week altogether. In a question that elicited responses about their progress, 80% of the students believed that they were able to achieve overwhelming progress, 60% mentioned that they were content with their progress. Specifically, when asked which area(s) they found the most improvement, some respondents pointed out more than one language skill: 67% of the students selected speaking, 33% writing, 27% listening, and 20% reading.

To better our understanding of from whom students learned most, for example from the instructor, native speakers, or classmates, 87% of the students attributed their progress to the instructor as the overall most effective aid in helping them learn Mandarin Chinese. Sixty percent of students indicated that their interaction with Chinese native speakers as the next most effective factor in helping them effectively learn Mandarin Chinese, while little found useful by interacting with classmates. In relation to this question, while identifying the most effective learning setting, 93% of the students agreed that the classroom was the most effective; learning in other settings, such as language lab, outside class learning, and Language House extracurricular activities, were all second to the classroom.

The Chinese Language Volunteer program seemed to be one of the salient factors that contributed students’ progress. As a result of the program, a majority of the students, 76%, agreed that it was very beneficial and helpful in assisting their studies, and 29% pointed out that it was an enjoyable experience. In fact, each student was able to find some improvement in a certain aspect of learning the language: 86% claimed that the program improved their oral skills, 64% claimed that it improved their writing skills, and around half of the students found the program helpful in proofreading, correcting mistakes, and answering questions. Another 21% of the students commented that although the program was helpful, it was still very demanding and “required [considerable] time commitment on an already large workload for the class.” On average, the students spent a total of 1.808 hours per week with their language partner.

Because each week’s requirements for the homework submission were consistent, all of the students found the homework agenda very well structured and sufficient in helping them prepare for class. While Mondays and Tuesdays were allotted for the character dictation quizzes, Wednesdays were allotted for the text reading quiz and Fridays for the oral performance quiz. Again, because the weekly quizzes were given in a consistent manner throughout the course, all of the students found the agenda of the weekly quizzes well structured and sufficient in helping the students prepare for class. While one student commented that the weekly quizzes were good, the homework submission agenda “kept [them] on their toes” because they were required to prepare something for the class everyday and in effect forced the students to review the material everyday, 30% of the students found the weekly quizzes as a propelling force that motivated students to work much harder. Although 27% found the weekly quizzes to be an intensive and demanding workload, 13% of the students still found it helpful and useful, especially since the agenda required them to learn and study the materials quickly.

One of the focuses of the weekly quizzes was students’ oral performance, which required the students to respond to the instructor’s questions. At the beginning of the semester, the students were provided with the quiz questions in form of
handouts prior to their oral performance. As a result, 93% of the students regarded the learning material as effective in preparing them for the weekly oral performance quizzes and mid-term oral performance because it highlighted the key components of the individual lessons and provided a clear guideline for what was to be expected. Toward the end of Chinese 202 the instructor implemented questioning that required spontaneous responses from the individual students. The instructor also required and encouraged students to provide more lengthy responses when answering questions in order to challenge the student’s language proficiency. In assessing the first type of practice, implementing spontaneous questioning, many of the students responded with assorted comments. Twenty percent of the students regarded the practice as “nerve-wracking,” but only 7% regarded the practice as difficult. Thirty-three percent agreed that the practice was effective in exercising their language skills, 13% felt that it improved their proficiency, and another 27% expressed that it was a good way to practice real-life conversational skills. In terms of the latter practice, requiring students to provide lengthy responses, almost half of the students, 40%, found it effective in developing language skills, while those that did not find it helpful, 13%, remarked that responding succinctly would have been preferred. Still, 47% of the students believed that the practice helped them exercise and improve all aspects of the language and 27% expressed that they were able to learn how to elaborate and think more clearly.

In order to improve the students’ oral skills, the instructor most of the time, if not always, provided immediate feedback and correction to the students every day in class after hearing their responses, especially during oral performance quizzes. As a result, 93% of the students regarded this teacher-to-student interaction followed by immediate feedback and correction as effective in the students’ learning process and found it to be much more effective than student-to-student interaction. Many of the students attribute the effectiveness of the teacher-to-student interaction to the teacher’s experience as opposed to the students’ lack of it. In addition, 60% of the students regarded the instructor’s opinion to be much more valuable and her feedback much more useful. However, a very small percentage of the students, less than 15%, regarded the teacher-to-student interaction as not effective as too much pressure might interfere with language output.

In evaluating the written portion of the midterm, 87% of the learners agreed that it challenged them to the utmost of their language ability, mostly because it tested all aspects of what they had learned and required students to understand how to write cohesively, utilizing the given grammar structure and vocabulary. In evaluating the oral portion of the mid-term, which required the students to speak at the paragraph and even the discourse level toward the end of Chinese 202, 93% of the students believed that it challenged them to the utmost of their language ability, namely because it required the student to organize their thoughts by utilizing complex sentence structures. Fifty-five percent believed that the oral portion helped them practice and develop better language skills despite the apprehension and intimidation they had when completing this portion of the midterm.

In summary, the results above indicate how and why students were able to achieve such a remarkable success and progress in their study of Intermediate Chinese. Students were constantly faced with challenging and demanding assignments that propelled and motivated them to perform to the best of their ability meanwhile trying to sustain the intensive workload. While 40% of the students attributed their successful learning result to the instruction of the instructor, citing her as an “exceptional teacher” and provided “personal dedication to the students,” another 40% attributed their success to the challenging and intensive workload of the course as well as its well organized and designed structure. Finally, 20% credited their success to their classmates, whose “solidarity that was created by working together pushed [them] all to continue improving.”

Conclusion

The implementation of the OPI guidelines in a foreign language classroom can be very effective if the curriculum is carefully designed and the learning activities are well synthesized. As communicative functions and tasks have become central roles in a foreign language class, the OPI guidelines will continue to gain significance in proficiency assessment. This paper sets an example for OPI-guided instruction in the hopes that inspiration, exploration, and brainstorming can be further generated to help instructors come up with a solid-grounded curriculum through which Mandarin Chinese learners will be able to attain a higher level of oral proficiency.

References


