

# Developing the Writing Proficiency of Spanish Heritage Language Learners

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# PRESENTATION GOALS

- Analyze strengths and weaknesses of Spanish heritage writers at Intermediate and Advanced levels of proficiency using the ACTFL Proficiency Guidelines (2012)
- Identify what writers at each level need to develop to move toward next level of proficiency
- Identify skills that can be used to scaffold development
- Discuss pedagogical practices to foster this development

# Context, instruments, and approach

Writing  
Proficiency  
of HLLs



# OUR APPROACH

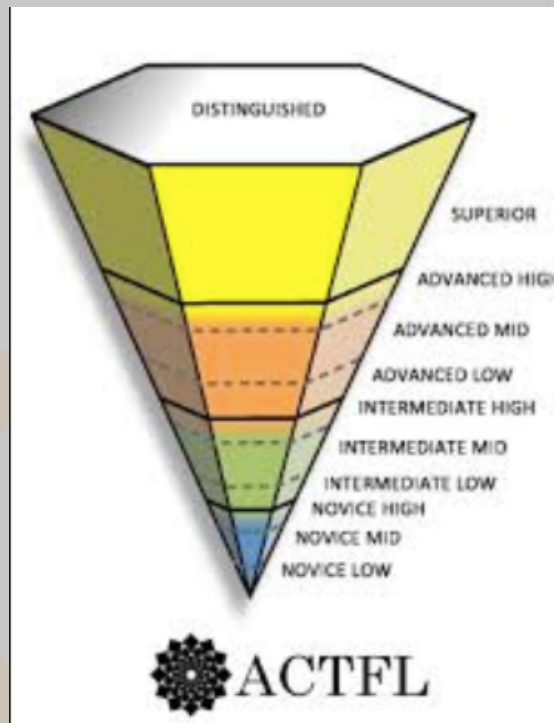
- Informed by sociolinguistic context of heritage languages and their speakers
    - minority vs. majority language
    - language variation
  - Proficiency-based
    - functional language
    - analyzed **globally**
- “Ability to use language for real-world purposes to accomplish real-world linguistic tasks across a wide range of topics and settings”

# PROFICIENCY CRITERIA

	Intermediate	Advanced	Superior
Functions	Writes simple messages, requests for information, notes mostly present tense	Narrates in major timeframes  Describes in major timeframes	Discusses topics concretely and abstractly; presents and supports opinions w/ cogent arguments and hypotheses
Content-Context	Familiar situations, personal experiences;	Informal and some formal writing of factual nature	Informal and formal writing on social, academic, and professional topics
Accuracy	Vocabulary limitations and errors in basic structures: comprehensible to readers accustomed to non-native writing	Breadth of generic vocabulary and control of most frequent structures: comprehensible to all native speakers	No pattern of errors in structures, grammar, vocabulary, spelling and/or punctuation distracts the reader
Text Type	Loosely connected sentences	Paragraph	Extended discourse

# WHAT DO WE KNOW?

- Proficiency develops globally
- Proficiency development takes time



# WHAT DO WE KNOW?

- Tasks should reinforce current level and develop the next major level
- Input is the basis for production
- **Explicit knowledge** does not simply become **implicit knowledge**
- Explicit instruction, especially for heritage learners, is **ineffective** in many areas

# RESEARCH CONTEXT

- Research conducted at the Center for Integrated Language Communities (CILC), a National Language Research Center
- 92 HLLs, 45 Intermediate Spanish HLLs and 47 Advanced Spanish HLLs
- Analysis focuses on Intermediate and Advanced

Sub-Level	
Intermediate Low	2
Intermediate Mid	8
Intermediate High	35
<b>Total Intermediate</b>	<b>45</b>
Advanced Low	30
Advanced Mid	15
Advanced High	2
<b>Total Advanced</b>	<b>47</b>



# INSTRUMENT I

- Writing Proficiency Test (WPT)
  - Test developed by the American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages (ACTFL)
  - Writing proficiency counterpart of widely used Oral Proficiency Interview (OPI)
  - Advantages
    - Often used for certification of teacher candidates
    - Proficiency levels (Novice Low – Superior) used for placement and curriculum design
    - High inter-rater reliability
    - Criterion-referenced
    - No monolingual “controls”

# INSTRUMENT II

- WPT Rater Review Form
  - Provides detailed information about each specific sample
  - Documents evidence of the Floor and Ceiling
  - Documents features of Assessment Criteria
    - Functions
    - Content/Context
    - Accuracy
    - Text Type

## FLOOR

### Rating Criteria

Functions: there is evidence of ability to

- ❑ Able to meet some limited practical writing needs by creating statements and formulating questions based on familiar material
- ❑ Able to meet a number of practical writing needs, such as short simple communications, compositions, and requests for information.
- ❑ Able to meet all practical writing needs of the Intermediate level, such as notes, everyday communications. They can also write compositions and simple summaries of a factual nature related to work and/or school experiences. They can write descriptions and narrations in different time frames when writing about everyday events and situations.

Context/Content:

- ❑ Highly predictable content areas and personal information. Vocabulary is adequate to express elementary needs.
- ❑ Practical needs, personal preferences, daily...

## CEILING

### Evidence of Breakdown

Functions: there is evidence of breakdown when attempting to:

- ❑ Narrate on topics of a factual nature
- ❑ Describe in topic areas of general interest

Content/Context:

- ❑ Comprehensibility (accuracy) suffers when moving beyond the autobiographical and everyday topics to topics of general interest, or workplace contexts, making it difficult to follow the writer's narrations/descriptions

Accuracy (linguistic breakdown is manifested in):

- ❑ Insufficient control of major timeframes (e.g. inconsistent use of appropriate time markers, resulting in loss of clarity (for example, verb forms for differentiating tense and aspect are not consistently accurate)
- ❑ Lack of vocabulary for addressing topics beyond familiar, everyday
- ❑ Patterned errors in conjugations, verb agreement, aspect control that interfere with accomplishment of the task

# EXAMPLE OF BREAKDOWN WHEN ATTEMPTING FUNCTION AT NEXT LEVEL OF PROFICIENCY

## IH Writer at Level

¡Hola! Me llamo Cindy. Estoy muy feliz que tu vas a venir para vivir con nosotros. Vivo en un apartamento, con tres cuartos, con mis hermanas. Yo no vivo en una area con muchos hispanos y es muy diferente de donde vives. Pero se de mucho lugares que podemos visitar.

Te puedo llevar a andar en el Parque Central, el parque más grande en Nueva York. Podemos montarnos en el caresol. Ahí te quiero enseñar donde trabaje mi hermana. Tambien te puedo a llevar a un resteraunte koreana, asi tu puedes conocer más a comidas diferentes.

¿Qué más quiere ver? ¿Qué te gusta hacer? ¿De cuál culturas quieres aprender?

Espero mucho tu llegada.

Cindy

## EXAMPLE OF BREAKDOWN WHEN ATTEMPTING FUNCTION AT NEXT LEVEL OF PROFICIENCY

### IH Writer at Advanced

¡El grupo coreano, llamado Big Bang, salieron con un albumo nuevo!

El grupo, de 15 hombres hermosos y talentados hablaron mucho de sus nuevos canciones. Saben que cuestaron bastante trabajo para terminarlos. Dicen que no podian salir de gusto o conocer a las chicas. Su tiempo solamente tenia espacio para comer y dormir.

Los coreanos cojen mucha influenica de la música hip-hop de los estados unidos. Cuando alguien mira a los videoes, pueden reconcer la influencia de hip-hop. No es musica tan extraña, como muchas gentes creen.

## NOW IT'S YOUR TURN

1. Do you measure the proficiency of your HLLs?
2. Why? Why not?
3. Even if you don't measure proficiency, what do you think is the proficiency range in your typical HL class?
4. What is an area of strength of your HLLs?
5. What is an area where they need more development?

# Strength and weaknesses of Intermediate-level writers

Analysis



# WHAT WE WANT TO KNOW

- What prevents Intermediate-level writers from performing at the Advanced level?
- What are the strengths and weaknesses of Intermediate-level writers?\*

\*Strengths and weaknesses identified within criteria, but develop in tandem with other criteria



# WHAT DO INTERMEDIATE-LEVEL WRITERS NEED TO DEVELOP TO MOVE TO ADVANCED?

	Intermediate	Advanced
Functions	<p>Writes simple messages, requests for information, notes</p> <p>Mostly present tense</p>	<p><b>Narrates in major timeframes</b></p> <p><b>Describes in major timeframes</b></p>
Content-Context	<p>Familiar situations, personal experiences</p>	<p><b>Informal and some formal writing of factual nature</b></p>
Accuracy	<p>Vocabulary limitations and errors in basic structures: <b>comprehensible to readers accustomed to non-native writing</b></p>	<p><b>Breadth of generic vocabulary and control of most frequent structures: comprehensible to all native speakers</b></p>
Text Type	<p>Loosely connected sentences</p>	<p><b>Paragraph</b></p>

# FUNCTION AND ACCURACY: NARRATION

What happens when Intermediate-level writers attempt narration?

No evidence of breakdown	Evidence of breakdown
67%	33%

Linguistic breakdown in control of major timeframes?

No evidence of breakdown	Evidence of breakdown
64%	36%

# FUNCTION AND CONTENT: DESCRIPTION

What happens when Intermediate-level writers attempt describing topics of general interest?

No evidence of breakdown	Evidence of breakdown
16%	85%

# CONTEXT/CONTENT AND ACCURACY: MOVING BEYOND THE FAMILIAR

Does comprehensibility suffer when moving beyond the autobiographical and everyday topics to topics of general interest?

No	Yes
22%	78%

Lack of vocabulary for topics beyond the familiar?

No	Yes
24%	76%

# TEXT TYPE AND ACCURACY: MOVING TOWARD THE PARAGRAPH

Can Intermediate-level writers produce skeletal paragraphs?

No	Yes
56%	45%

Variety of connectors appropriate for the Advanced level?

No	Yes
60%	40%

# ACCURACY: PATTERNED ERRORS AND INTERFERENCE FROM ENGLISH

Do patterned errors in conjugations, verb agreement, aspect control interfere with accomplishment of the task ?

Sublevel	No	Yes
IM	12.5%	87.5%
IH	63%	37%

Linguistic interference from English?

No	Yes
78%	22%

# INTERMEDIATE: CONCLUSIONS

- Keep in mind that the difficulties identified here describe performance at **Advanced level**
- There might be significant differences between sublevels, at least for some criteria

# INTERMEDIATE: CONCLUSIONS

## Strength

Narration  
Control of timeframes

## Weakness

Describing in areas of general interest

Performing beyond familiar topics  
Lack of vocabulary beyond the familiar

Skeletal paragraphs  
Lack of connectors



# INTERMEDIATE: IMPLICATIONS FOR INSTRUCTION

How do we leverage strengths?

Narration  
Control of timeframes

How do we develop functions,  
context/content, accuracy, and text  
type

Describing in areas of general interest

Performing beyond familiar topics  
Lack of vocabulary beyond the  
familiar

Skeletal paragraphs  
Lack of connectors

# Strength and weaknesses of Advanced-level writers

Analysis



# WHAT WE WANT TO KNOW

- What prevents Advanced-level writers from performing at the Superior level?
- What are the strengths and weaknesses of Advanced-level writers?

\*Strengths and weaknesses identified within criteria, but develop in tandem with other criteria

# WHAT DO ADVANCED-LEVEL WRITERS NEED TO DEVELOP TO MOVE TO SUPERIOR?

	Advanced	Superior
Functions	<p>Narrates in major timeframes</p> <p>Describes in major timeframes</p>	<p>Explains complex matters in detail</p> <p>Discusses topics concretely and abstractly</p> <p>Presents and supports opinions w/ cogent arguments and develops hypotheses</p>
Content-Context	<p>Informal and some formal writing of factual nature</p>	<p>Informal and formal writing on social, academic, and professional topics</p>
Accuracy	<p>Breadth of generic vocabulary and control of most frequent structures: <b>comprehensible to all native speakers</b></p>	<p><b>No pattern of errors</b> in structures, grammar, vocabulary, spelling and/or punctuation distracts the reader</p>
Text Type	<p>Paragraph</p>	<p><b>Extended discourse</b></p>

# SUPERIOR LEVEL FUNCTIONS

What happens when A-level writers attempt to explain complex matters in detail?

No evidence of breakdown	Evidence of breakdown
42%	58%

What happens when A-level writers attempt to treat an issue abstractly?

No evidence of breakdown	Evidence of breakdown
24%	76%

What happens when A-level writers attempt to present and support opinions by developing cogent arguments?

No evidence of breakdown	Evidence of breakdown
11%	89%

# TOTAL BREAKDOWN?

While attempting Superior-level functions, the  
writing of 80% of writers  
**DOES NOT** deteriorate significantly

and...

When writing under the demands of Superior-level  
tasks there are no patterns of errors that interfere  
with the communication for 80% of writers

What is going on?

## AM WRITER ATTEMPTING A SUPERIOR-LEVEL PROMPT

"...Toda mi vida viví con mi mamá, y aunque mi papá me visitaba cada semana, siempre faltó su figura en la casa. Sin embargo, tuve la fortuna de vivir con varios tíos y gracias a eso entendí el comportamiento de un hombre y una mujer. En otros casos, muchos niños desconocen el comportamiento de un hombre y una mujer y su rol en la sociedad."

# CONTEXT/CONTENT AND ACCURACY: WRITING IN FORMAL CONTEXTS

Does comprehensibility suffer when writing about issues related to social, academic, or professional topics?

No	Yes
51%	49%

Are there deficiencies when writing in formal contexts?

No	Yes
16%	84%



# ACCURACY: INTERFERENCE FROM ENGLISH

Does interference from English cause miscommunication?

No	Yes
87%	13%

# TEXT TYPE: MOVING TOWARD EXTENDED DISCOURSE

When attempting Superior-level tasks, do writers produce mainly extended discourse?

No	Yes
98%	2%

# ADVANCED: CONCLUSIONS

- Keep in mind that the difficulties identified here describe performance at **Superior** level
- There might be significant differences between sublevels, at least for some criteria

# ADVANCED: CONCLUSIONS

## Strength

Explain complex matters in detail

## Weakness

Treat issues abstractly

Present opinions  
Support opinions  
Hypothesize

Extended discourse

# ADVANCED: IMPLICATIONS FOR INSTRUCTION

How do we leverage strengths?

Explain complex matters in detail

How do we develop functions, context/content, accuracy, and text type?

Treat issues abstractly

Present opinions  
Support opinions  
Hypothesize

Extended discourse

# General ecommmendations

Intermediate  
to Advanced  
Advanced to  
Superior



# GENERAL

- Know your learners—keep in mind:
  - Proficiency level: what they can and cannot do with the language
  - Different learners at the same level of proficiency perform the level differently
- Let proficiency levels inform goals
  - Intermediate writers should work on Advanced skills
  - Advanced writers should work on Superior skills
  - Do not skip levels when preparing assignments/prompts
  - Sublevels matter

# GENERAL

- Components of proficiency
  - Accuracy issues tend to appear when the writer is pushed to write at the next level of proficiency
  - Allow a space for inaccuracy as part of the developmental process
  - Interference from English does not tend to impede comprehensibility—do not focus on eliminating contact phenomena from repertoire
  - Do not expect perfection (in terms of accuracy) from Intermediate-level writers



# PEDAGOGICAL RECOMMENDATIONS: INTERMEDIATE

- Input
  - Expose learners to input that contains detailed **descriptions** in all timeframes & content that goes **beyond the biographical**
  - Introduce learners to a variety of connectors
- Writing practice
  - Develop assignments that require HLs to write narrations on non-biographical topics in all timeframes
  - Use prompts that elicit detailed descriptions
  - Use prompts that elicit structured paragraphs
- Direct instruction
  - Writing robust paragraphs
  - Particularities of spelling in Spanish and spelling differences between Spanish and English
  - How to use spellcheck in Spanish

# PEDAGOGICAL RECOMMENDATIONS: ADVANCED

- Input
  - Expose learners to input on academic and professional topics that treats issues both **concretely** and **abstractly**, presents and supports opinions, and develops **hypotheses**
- Writing practice
  - Develop assignments on academic & professional issues
  - Require writers to treat issues both from a concrete and an abstract perspective, to present and support opinions, and to develop hypotheses
- Direct instruction
  - Difference between treating an issue concretely and abstractly
  - Linguistic strategies for presenting and supporting opinions and for developing hypotheses
  - How to organize paragraphs for cohesion
  - How to use accent marks & spellcheck in Spanish

# THANK YOU!

- Visit us at our booth #1333
- Resources available on our site [www.cilc.gc.cuny.edu](http://www.cilc.gc.cuny.edu)
- Check out **Teleplaza** , a portal for heritage and Latinx Studies courses!
- Sign in to receive updates
- Contact us [cilc@gc.cuny.edu](mailto:cilc@gc.cuny.edu)

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# EXAMPLES

## AM Writer: Functions

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## S Writer: Functions

"...Estas asociaciones podrían contar con más apoyo institucional para seguir llevando a cabo su misión. Se trata, en cualquier caso, de apoyar a una transición más llevadera, pero de mantener, en lo posible, la cultura original. Por eso, se debería apuntar hacia una situación multicultural (y plurilingüe, si viene al caso) y relaciones más cercanas con otras instituciones, tanto culturales como sociales, ya establecidas en la ciudad."

# FACTORS CORRELATING WITH WPT

- Age of arrival
  - Swender et al. (2014) found the same for oral proficiency (OPI)
- Formal HL instruction in a country where the HL is dominant
- Frequent use of the HL
  - with a large number of interlocutors
  - in a large number of contexts
  - with siblings and friends
  - for reading books and/or articles
  - text messaging
- Can-do self-rating of proficiency
  - Swender et al. (2014) found greater over-estimation of oral proficiency
- No correlation
  - Years of high school Spanish instruction
  - Frequent travel to Spanish-speaking country