

Cultural Dimensions of Oral Proficiency in Arabic

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Introduction

- Definition of culture applicable to ACTFL Oral Proficiency Guidelines – Cultural knowledge, beliefs, and practices reflected in language use
- Objective: Cross-cultural communication
- Interpersonal and presentational modes
- Incorporate culture proficiency guidelines into the ACTFL Oral Proficiency Guidelines
- Another option that can be pursued by others – Guidelines for testing cultural knowledge in English
- Culture in the current Guidelines
- Big “C” and small “c”

Elements to be Included in Arab Culture Proficiency Guidelines

- Degree of interaction
 - Limited Survival Competence, Limited Social Competence, General Social & Professional Competence, Full Social & Professional Competence
- Speaking styles and familiar and unfamiliar situations/discourse functions
- Non-verbal communication/body language
- Knowledge of society
- Etiquette/behavior/politeness formulae and appropriate forms of address

Elements Continued

- Formal and informal registers
- Abstractness, hypothesis, metaphors, and allusions
- Code/variants of Arabic (MSA + one dialect but when?)

Culture Proficiency Guidelines

■ **Novice**

Limited interaction. May be considerate but does not alter behavior to accommodate new cultural context. Is basically unaware of the body cues that accompany the few verbal expressions that have been acquired. Lacks generally the knowledge of cultural patterns requisite for survival situations.

Culture Guidelines Continued

■ Intermediate

Survival competence. Can deal with familiar survival situations and interact with native speakers accustomed to foreigners. Uses behavior acquired to greet, bid farewell, express desires, ask directions, buy food, use transportation, etc. but has limited sense of the appropriate use of phrases used for these purposes in a variety of contexts.

Uncomfortable with certain unfamiliar speaking styles (raised voices, wider range of emotional affect, interruptions) and with physical aspects of speaking situations (close physical proximity, physical contact, and behaviors and behaviors such as staring and direct eye contact).

Culture Guidelines Continued

■ **Advanced**

Limited social competence. Handles routine social situations successfully with native speakers accustomed to foreigners. Shows comprehension of common rules of etiquette, taboos, and sensitivities, although their own home culture predominates. Is comfortable with many aspects of native speaking styles and is aware of their significance, though rarely uses them in speaking situations (raised voice and extensive affect). Functions in many situations with requisite politeness. Can make polite requests, accept and refuse invitations, offer and receive gifts, request support or help, apologize, make introductions, telephone, purchase and bargain, do routine banking. Some understanding and use of culture-based genres of speech (proverbs and poetry) and can participate in a limited way in native conversation assuming knowledge of society (customs, traditions, history, institutions).

Culture Guidelines Continued

■ **Superior**

General social and professional competence. Can participate in almost all situations of oral discourse with sensitivity, including some involving common taboos, or other emotionally charged subjects. Comprehends most non-verbal responses. Masters politeness formulae and appropriate forms of address in most social situations. Makes appropriate use of cultural references and expressions. Generally distinguishes between formal and informal registers. Discusses and understands abstract ideas and can hypothesize.

Guidelines Continued

- **Distinguished**

Full social and professional competence. Adapts behavior to audience. Has internalized the concept that culture is relative and would always be on the look-out to do the appropriate thing. Can counsel, show empathy, argue, persuade, negotiate, represent a point of view, describe and compare features of the home and target cultures. Can discuss history, geography, customs, traditions, current events, and national policies. Perceives and comprehends all non-verbalized forms of communication. Recognizes almost all metaphors and allusions. Controls formal and informal registers of behavior. Lacks cultural background and experiences of a person growing up in an Arab family, i.e. a native speaker.

Culture Guidelines Continued

- **Native Educated Speaker**

Indistinguishable from a person brought up and educated in the culture

Next Steps

- Consult testing experts & anthropologists
- Possibly break each proficiency level down into Low, Mid and High
- Propose incorporation of more cultural proficiency into Oral Proficiency Guidelines
- Integrate culture to be assessed through the OPI