

Running Head: Computerized Oral Proficiency Instrument

Multimedia Computer Technology and Performance-Based Language Testing: A
Demonstration of the Computerized Oral Proficiency Instrument (COPI)

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Equipment Needs: In Focus Litepro 620 as Computer Projector

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Abstract

This paper describes the administration and scoring programs of the Computerized Oral Proficiency Instrument (COPI), a multi-media, computer-administered oral proficiency test. The computer specifications required to run the test are also specified.

The Computerized Oral Proficiency Instrument (COPI) is a multi-media, computer-administered adaptation of the tape-mediated Simulated Oral Proficiency Interview (SOPI). Both the SOPI and the COPI are oral proficiency tests based on the *Speaking Proficiency Guidelines* of the American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages (ACTFL). Oral proficiency tests like the SOPI and COPI use real life tasks to elicit speech ratable by the ACTFL Guidelines' criteria¹. The purpose of the COPI is to use the advantages of multi-media computer technology to improve the SOPI by giving examinees more control over various aspects of the testing situation and increasing raters' efficiency in scoring the test.

The Spanish version of the COPI will be presented although an Arabic and a Chinese version are also being prepared. The demonstration consists of two parts: the first is a demonstration of how the program is administered as the test is being taken by an examinee; and the second is a demonstration of the scoring program as used by a rater who is assessing an examinee's language samples.

¹ "The ACTFL guidelines represent a hierarchy of global characterizations of integrated performance in speaking, listening, reading and writing. Each description is representative, not an exhaustive, sample of range of ability, and each level subsumes all previous levels, moving from simple to complex in an "all-before-and-more fashion." (ACTFL, 1986, p. 1). The ACTFL levels are as follows: Novice, Intermediate, Advanced and Superior. The Novice, Intermediate, and Advanced are further subdivided into Low, Mid and High, e.g., Novice-Low, Novice-Mid and Novice-High.

Administration Program

The master program and an underlying pool of about 100 tasks are contained in a CD-ROM. Each task is a separate master computer file composed of a brief description of the task, written and audio directions in English and Spanish, a picture that accompanies the task (for those tasks that have pictures) and an audio prompt from a native Spanish-speaker. Depending on the choices that the examinee makes, the test takes anywhere from 30-50 minutes.

The COPI uses an algorithm which allows examinees (within some limits) to choose the following aspects of the tests: amount of preparation and response time, speaking function, topic, level of difficulty, and language of the directions for each performance task. When taking the COPI, the examinee goes through the following phases: welcome, information on the purpose and structure of the COPI; input and correction of personal information; self-assessment of proficiency level; listening to an adequate response to (a) sample task(s); practice with the same sample task(s); responding to performance tasks (the actual test); feedback about the levels of the tasks that the examinee took, and closing. A photograph of a friendly, female “guide” accompanies the screens. The guide’s photograph is present in all the screens that welcome, give instructions and close the program.

Examinee Choice

Time

The COPI provides more preparation and response time for higher- than lower-level tasks, but examinees still have the choice to use up all the time allotted or to click on a button when they are finished preparing or are ready to respond.

Speaking Functions and Topics

Examinees are given choices throughout the program, and an algorithm ensures that examinees get each speaking function (e.g., narrating in the past) and topic (e.g., food) only once. Examinees are thus exposed to a variety of tasks.

Level of Difficulty

The examinees' level of difficulty for the first task is determined by the examinees' self-assessment scores and the choices of levels during the practice task. However, after the first task, the program alternates from giving examinees choices or not. During the times that examinees are not given a choice, the algorithm pushes examinees to higher level tasks to ensure that they are given an opportunity to reach their ceilings.

Language of Directions

At present, only the higher-level Spanish speakers are given a choice of getting the directions in English or Spanish, while the lower-level Spanish speakers have English directions. However, a later version of the COPI will include both English and Spanish directions for lower-level speakers. This is to provide more language support for the lower-level speakers.

We have not validated the Spanish COPI yet, but results from the pilot test with 15 examinees showed that the examinees felt more comfortable and less anxious because they were given certain choices that made the test more flexible. This is an improvement from the SOPI, where such choices were unavailable.

Steps in Taking the COPI

Welcome/Information on the Purpose and Structure of the COPI

The purpose is to introduce examinees to the COPI and help them feel more at ease.

Input and Correction of Personal Information

Examinees enter their personal data and are given an opportunity to correct any wrong information. The information is used to identify the examinees and to tailor some of the tasks to the examinees' profiles. For instance, in Arabic culture (for the Arabic COPI) it is inappropriate for persons of the opposite sex to do certain activities together (e.g., share an apartment). Therefore, an algorithm in the COPI ensures that a female or male version of these tasks comes up depending on whether the examinee is identified as a female or male, respectively.

Self-Assessment of One's Proficiency Level

Examinees answer 18 questions about their abilities to communicate in Spanish, e.g., give directions, ask questions, hypothesize, etc. Kenyon, 1996 showed that the correlation between examinees' answers to these 18 self-assessment questions and their actual ACTFL rating is .78 (correlations of this magnitude are considered high in the social sciences). Thus, the COPI program uses examinees' levels at self-assessment to determine the levels at which to give them the sample questions.

Listening to and Practice on Sample Tasks

Examinees are given an opportunity to listen to an adequate response to a sample task. They are then asked to respond to the same sample task. Next, examinees are asked

if they want to practice with an easier or more difficult task, or if they want to go on to the actual test.

Responding to Performance Tasks (The Actual Test)

The level of the examinees' performance task is determined by the level of their last sample task. Examinees get a minimum of four items at their self-assessment level and three at the next higher level (or next lower level if their self-assessment level is at Superior), for a minimum of seven items. But depending on the choices they make, examinees can get a maximum of 11 tasks.

Feedback About the Levels of the Tasks that Examinees Took and Closing

Examinees get feedback about the levels of tasks they have taken, are thanked for their participation and are given general instructions on how their responses will be rated.

Scoring Program

As with the SOPI, the COPI is scored following the criteria of ACTFL's *Speaking Proficiency Guidelines*. The scoring program allows raters to hear the examinees' responses for each task and to listen to the examinees' tasks in any order. As raters assess each task; elements of the task, such as its ACTFL level, the picture accompanying the task, the directions and the Spanish prompt appear on the screen. These elements can give raters the background information about each task, and facilitate the rating process. Raters can also rewind each examinee's response for a particular task and they can likewise go back to previously rated tasks. The program also allows raters to write notes to examinees so that, aside from providing a global rating, raters are also able to give overall comments and task-specific feedback to each examinee. In addition, based on the ACTFL rating guidelines, the COPI allows raters to listen to only those tasks that are necessary to give an

accurate assessment of the examinees' level, thereby increasing raters' efficiency. For example, if an examinee took four Superior tasks and three Advanced tasks, we suggest that the rater start assessing the highest level (Superior) tasks first. If the examinee is clearly a Superior speaker based on his/her performance on the four Superior tasks, then it is not necessary for the rater to assess the three Advanced tasks.

Technical Requirements and Specifications

The COPI program works well with a Windows 95 Computer, or higher; with a Pentium processor and 64 MB of RAM. The examinees' responses can be recorded on internal or external zip drives, or the hard drive. We do not recommend the use of Windows NT or laptop computers because the small memory space in these types of computers makes recording responses difficult.

References

American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages. (1986). ACTFL Proficiency Guidelines. Yonkers, NY: Author (also available on the world wide web: <http://www.actfl.org/htdocs/pubs/guidelines.htm>).

Kenyon, D. (1996, July). Linking performance on a multiple-choice reading test to verbally-defined proficiency levels. 18th Annual Language Testing Research Colloquium, Tampere, Finland.