

## Towards communicative competency: Matching teaching and testing

Our institution recently established a new general education curriculum that aims to prepare students for lives as engaged global citizens and leaders. Rather than satisfying a six-hour, “seat-time” foreign language requirement as before, today’s students must demonstrate foreign language competence at ACTFL’s Intermediate-Mid level.

When our institution adopted this requirement, our department had the task of creating competency exit tests that build on our shared communicative approach. This paper presents the results of the practical questions discussed as we sought the best way to align teaching and assessment with the new competency requirement. The paper reviews current research and provides concrete models for contextualized assessment of speaking, listening, reading, and writing based on classroom techniques for diagnosis of students’ progress, provision of feedback to students, and evaluation of our teaching approach. The models apply the notion that language testing be done with a particular purpose, based on a particular methodology, and set in a specific context. The competency test samples also address cultural matters by embedding a cultural component in each skill. We provide samples in French and Spanish as this paper is a collaborative work by teachers of the two languages.

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## Towards communicative competency: Matching teaching and testing

In Spring 2002, our institution established a new general education guideline requiring students to demonstrate foreign language competency at the ACTFL “Intermediate-Mid” (I-M) level. As part of this reform, our department had the task of creating competency exit tests for most of the foreign languages we teach. This paper presents the results of the practical questions discussed as we sought the best way to assess students’ communicative competency.

Since language testing has a specific purpose and reflects a particular methodology and context, our discussion explored what we do in the classroom to diagnose students’ progress, to provide feedback, and to evaluate our teaching approach. We felt that only by moving through this process could we assess students’ language and cultural skills in a manner consistent with their learning experience in the classroom. We also consulted research on second language assessment and on communicative teaching / learning processes so as to make appropriate adjustments to our teaching practice and to create language tests that are valid, effective, and objective.

This paper consists of four sections, each dealing with the assessment of a single language skill: Writing, Speaking, Reading and Listening.<sup>1</sup> While culture includes those “everyday aspects of life within a society” which are present but not necessarily overtly expressed, Culture embraces “those aspects and artifacts of society that represent what we might call achievements,” e.g. literary or artistic endeavors (VanPatten 212). Since a cultural component is embedded in each skill, the test samples below also address cultural matters. We provide samples in French and Spanish as this paper is a collaborative work by teachers of the two languages.

Meredith College ushered in a new general education curriculum in Fall 2003.<sup>2</sup> The key elements of the curriculum are “making connections” and “making a difference.” General

education course work now aims specifically to equip students to “participate responsibly and ethically in society, the global community, and the natural world.”<sup>3</sup> Another official document, the Meredith College Vision Statement, further prescribes the preparation of students for lives as “engaged global citizens and leaders.”<sup>4</sup> These and other imperatives are transforming foreign language instruction. Even at two years’ remove, they still seem extraordinarily bold. Rather than fulfilling a six-hour, “seat-time” requirement as before, today’s students must demonstrate foreign language competence at the ACTFL I-M level.

The efforts of the foreign language department therefore focus most urgently on the development of students’ practical language skills. Our goals are 1) to prepare students to use the foreign language to make connections in the real world and 2) to verify that students are so prepared. Toward these ends, our efforts are best described in terms of Rivers’ familiar dichotomy of *skill-getting* (the student understands how the language works) versus *skill-using* (the student applies the code in task-based communication).<sup>5</sup> A useful framework for this discussion, the distinction also guides our efforts to make language courses serve the practical, skill-using goals of the new “gen-ed.” We seek to improve our methods through research and professional involvement, in departmental discussions, and in classroom practice.<sup>6</sup>

To measure students’ skills, beginning in Fall 2002 teams of foreign language teachers prepared on-line competency tests in French, German, Italian, and Spanish, following departmental guidelines. Each test has five parts--Listening, Speaking I, Speaking II (video), Reading, and Writing—and resides on a secure on-campus server. Although there are several inducements for continued study of foreign languages and literatures at Meredith, the tests also serve as exit tests: once a student passes the test, she may opt out of foreign language altogether. Competency tests occur four or five times each year on a schedule that dovetails with foreign language placement testing, fall orientation, and pre-registration advising of students.

Before developing the competency tests and calibrating them at the ACTFL I-M level in each of five sections, first we needed to determine which communicative functions we consider most vital. Meeting as a department and in language-specific teams, we developed a list of communicative tasks that we believe students should be able to negotiate successfully at some point in the latter weeks of their second year of study. We took into account the “global tasks / functions” cultivated in first- and second-year language courses; we also consulted the list of functions in the table of contents of pertinent foreign language textbooks.<sup>7</sup>

### I. Writing

For Writing, the result was similar in content to the “curricular planning guide for Writing” proposed by Omaggio (*TLC* 1986: 235). In Writing as in other skills, we emphasize functional communication, i.e., “using the language for the student’s own purposes and, above all, getting the message across.” According to ACTFL Proficiency guidelines, at the I-M level these writers can produce “loosely connected texts that are based on personal preferences, daily routines, common events, and other topics related to personal experiences and immediate surroundings. Most writing is framed in present time, with inconsistent references to other time frames.”<sup>8</sup> Our interpretation emphasizes situations in which the student communicates with the “sympathetic interlocutor” of ACTFL’s generic description of I-M.

As the theme of the tests is “study abroad,” students must use the foreign language to navigate a semester at a university in France, Germany, Italy or Spain. The task proposed in the Writing section of the French competency test is a guided activity similar to that of the Composition section of Omaggio’s sample test (*TLC* 1986: 456). To provide valuable intermediate-level practice in Writing (and, for teachers, practice in joint assessment of Writing)

and to familiarize students with the *format* of the competency test, teachers of intermediate-level courses give an in-class, guided writing assignment (see Fig. 1). Because the purpose of this section is to test Writing only, the instructions are in English. For the Writing part of the test

Fig. 1: French in-class writing assignment

You would like to study next summer at a university in France. This will be your first trip to France. You are considering the Centre International d'Etudes Françaises (CIDEF) in Angers, because you have heard that Angers is a great place to be in July.

To defray your expenses for the trip, you decide to apply for a travel award from the Department of Foreign Languages & Literatures. To finish your application, you need just one more item--a writing sample in French.

You're now going to compose the writing sample for submission with your application to the award administrator, Dr Machelidon. Your writing sample should contain *at least* 7-8 complete sentences. Address each item below, using verb tenses appropriate for each item.

1. **Vous racontez une expérience personnelle qui vous a motivée à étudier le français.** (You relate a personal experience that motivated you to study French.)
2. **Vous avez beaucoup de questions sur la vie des étudiants en France. Dans votre message, posez au moins cinq de vos questions.** (You have lots of questions about student life in France. In your email, ask at least five of your questions.)
3. **Vous dites ce que vous avez l'intention de faire pendant votre séjour à Angers.** (Tell what you intend to do during your stay in Angers.)

proper, the student looks at a schedule of courses to be offered the next semester and writes a 7- or 8-sentence email to her academic advisor. In her message, the student relates an experience in the past, asks several questions about courses to be taken in her “return” semester, and shares her plans for June, after exams in France. As with the in-class guided writing assignment, instructions are in English. This assessment emphasizes not discrete grammar points but rather the activity’s “authenticity” and practical, personal use of language.<sup>9</sup> Meanwhile, the successful student must write declarative and interrogative sentences using—at minimum—past, present, and (near) future tenses, and appropriate vocabulary.

To evaluate students' responses as uniformly and as rapidly as possible, teachers use a departmental score-sheet which may fairly be termed a hybridization of Madsen's "analytical" and "holistic" methods for the evaluation of Writing.<sup>10</sup> That is, our criteria consider the student's overall performance while also providing for assessment of formal accuracy. As shown in Fig. 2, three rubrics (verb tenses, grammar, and vocabulary) call for scrutiny of specific components of the sample while the other four categories permit impressionistic evaluation. In preparing

Fig. 2: French competency score sheet for Writing

<b>Writing (total possible 35)</b>							
	Fail					Excellent	Score
Content addressing each item	0	1	2	3	4	5	_____
Appropriate tenses correctly used	0	1	2	3	4	5	_____
Appropriate vocabulary	0	1	2	3	4	5	_____
Grammar	0	1	2	3	4	5	_____
Message is comprehensible	0	1	2	3	4	5	_____
Logical flow (connectors) and organization	0	1	2	3	4	5	_____
Level of language usage	0	1	2	3	4	5	_____

"engaged global citizens and leaders," we asked ourselves, what is the proper weight of Writing out of 200 total points? We believe our rightful role in competency is to help prepare students who think, listen, and speak "on their feet." In our departmental discussions, therefore, we opted to emphasize Listening and Speaking, which—combined—account for 70% of points on the competency test. As shown here, Writing is worth 35 of the 200 points.

The competency requirement naturally affects the way we teach language, especially at beginning and intermediate levels. We are therefore discussing and gradually implementing new methods and materials to help students achieve competency. For example, students planning to take the competency test for the first time sometimes want teachers' suggestions on how to

prepare; likewise, students who take the test but do not pass may want tips on how to improve their performance on the next round. We have therefore collaborated on a tip-sheet that makes specific suggestions on preparation for each of the sections of the test.<sup>11</sup>

Since 2002, we have increasingly experimented with new forms of “contextualized assessment” in all courses, including the three written tests in FRE102 (second-semester, first-year French), of which excerpts are presented below. The challenge is to create interesting and colorful frameworks for students’ “authentic” use of the grammar and vocabulary studied in class. Omaggio maintains that “when [simple writing] exercises are contextualized, they can acquaint learners . . . with the principles by which the elements of the new language can be incorporated into discourse frameworks that accomplish various communicative tasks” (*TLC* 1986: 235). Accordingly, we have sought to integrate lesson materials into an authentic, everyday context and—again—to assess communicative ability, not grammar. Though similar attempts had been made in the past, now our efforts are more focused. The process is challenging and time-consuming, but also very worthwhile.

The interconnected episodes discussed here appeared on a test in French 102 in Spring 2002. Though the content is straight from the pages of *Contacts* that the class studied, the undergirding philosophy of assessment departs radically from that of the *Contacts* Test Bank. The backdrop of the interrelated test activities is a leisurely Saturday somewhere in Paris. In *Samedi à la maison* (Saturday at home), e.g., the student imagines her “ideal living room,” especially the best configuration of furniture (see Fig. 3). She writes three complete sentences, using different prepositions. She also supplies the correct gender of nouns, sometimes also the correct contraction.

Although the grammar requirements here may seem very specific, in fact the student has great latitude in her choice of words. The illustrated activity resembles the samples with accompanying visuals in Omaggio’s Novice-Level Activities (*TLC* 1986: 237-240). In the

Fig. 3: French 102, *Samedi à la maison* [Saturday at home]

**1. Oh! Vous avez besoin de changer la position des meubles dans votre salon! Imaginez votre salon idéal.** [Oh! You need to rearrange the furniture in your living room! Imagine your ideal living room.]

Répondez en français. *Utilisez trois prépositions différentes dans trois phrases complètes.* (Answer in French. Use a different preposition in each of three complete sentences.)

**Où allez-vous placer...**  
(Where are you going to put...)

le sofa ? (the sofa ?) .....

.....

la table ? (the table ?) .....

.....

le fauteuil ? (the armchair ?) .....

.....

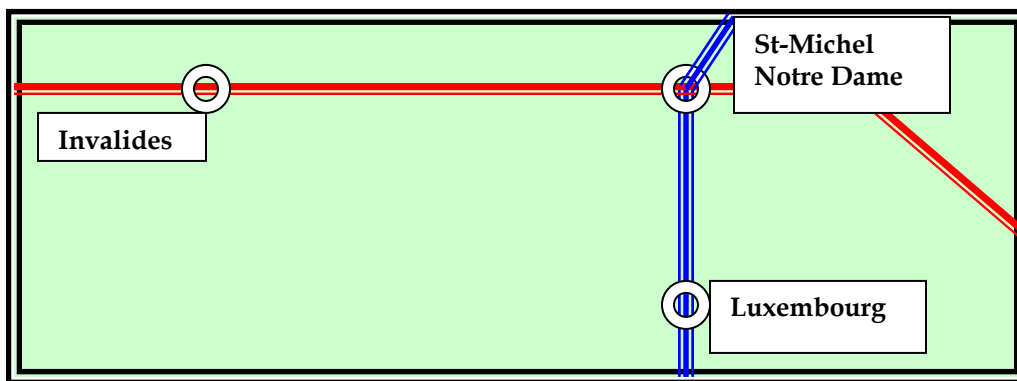
student’s three sentences, she may simply recycle the structure in the prompt, along with appropriate prepositions of place. She can take the plunge and write *Je vais placer le fauteuil à côté du sofa* (I’m going to put the armchair next to the sofa), complete with contraction. Or she can finesse it, opting for *devant*, *derrière*, or *entre*, thereby avoiding contractions altogether. The essential task is to make her plan understandable to the “sympathetic interlocutor.” Evaluators give full credit for any of the variations indicated; they do not challenge the furniture arrangements proposed, even if most pieces migrate to a corner of the room or cluster around the door. Study-abroad students need good working knowledge of public transportation when they arrive in France, beginning with the subway. Since learners had studied command forms in French 102



and had spent much of one class navigating the subway on a map, they had the essential “equipment” to write the sentences required (see Fig. 4).<sup>12</sup> The test instructions ask the student to write directions from her residence, near *Luxembourg*, to the *Fnac* boutique near *Invalides*. In fact, there is no *Fnac* near *Invalides*, but teachers rationalize the fiction because it provides a clear-cut itinerary with a single change of train.

Fig. 4: French 102, *Dans le métro* [On the subway]

*Vous désirez visiter la boutique électronique de la Fnac qui est située près d’Invalides. Vous habitez près de la station de métro Luxembourg. Vous allez à la Fnac en métro. Regardez le plan de métro ci-dessous.* [You want to visit the Fnac electronics boutique near the Invalides subway station. You live near the Luxembourg station. You’re taking the subway to the boutique. Look at the subway map below.]



*Pour aller de Luxembourg à Invalides ? Dans trois phrases complètes, écrivez les directions essentielles.* [How do you get from Luxembourg to Invalides? Write three complete sentences giving the essential directions.]

*D’abord* (First), .....

*Ensuite* (Next), .....

*Enfin* (Finally), .....

The student may answer in a declarative sentence with *je*, *tu*, *vous* or even *nous* as subject, something like *Je prends le métro à Luxembourg* (I take the subway at Luxembourg) or *Je monte à Luxembourg* (I get on at Luxembourg). That gets the message across. She may use the imperative or a linking verb, e.g., *Je vais prendre le métro à Luxembourg* (I’m going to take the subway at Luxembourg). In the student’s second and third sentences, evaluators look for

acknowledgement of the transfer at *Saint-Michel x Notre Dame* and arrival at *Invalides*. As in the furniture-moving episode, here the cultural context is authentic. As for the task, one can imagine a student *thinking* the directions, or perhaps *saying* them to a newcomer to Paris, but would she ever take the trouble to *write out* the directions in French? At minimum, the activity responds to Magnan's suggestion (118) that—for practice in Writing—students may be asked to transcribe something they might actually say.

## II. Speaking

As stated previously, the Meredith competency test especially emphasizes Speaking, evaluating it in two different communicative formats: a series of speaking exercises based on visual cues and a video role-play activity. This section describes the video activity, explains its design and its place within the exam, and reviews our assessment principles.

As a “mixed-format” or “hybrid” activity, the video assesses students’ Speaking ability in combination with Listening, Reading, and Cultural proficiency.<sup>13</sup> Omaggio Hadley ranks foreign language test items according to two major criteria, “the naturalness or authenticity of the language used” and the items’ degree of specificity (*TLC* 2001: 400). She then plots them in relation to intersecting axes. On a vertical axis she classifies test items ranging from the least desirable (e.g. drill-like traditional exercises) to the more desirable (e.g. authentic communicative exchanges). Along a horizontal continuum she distinguishes among test items that require discrete-point answers and those eliciting open-ended responses. In her view, tests should “include items from various points along the horizontal axis, since this represents a blend of communicative and linguistic concerns. All of the test items, however, should fall within the lower ranges of the vertical axis if the test is to represent natural language use.”<sup>14</sup> According to

this classification, our video activity displays sequential, naturalistic discourse requiring global comprehension while also allowing for fairly divergent production, several answers being possible.


This role-play activity is based on a short video clip. The student is asked to imagine that she is enrolled in the Meredith study abroad program in France. Two French native speakers have invited her to lunch in a quaint local restaurant. The student is instructed to respond to the visual, aural, and cultural cues presented by the two French women in the course of the informal conversation. Together, the three friends comment on the restaurant's décor and French-language menu (see Fig. 5), order food and beverages, and discuss sightseeing destinations in the local town and in France. The language and cultural functions featured in the clip are: greetings, ordering, expressing opinions or preferences, describing, and specifying duration.

When we designed the oral component of the competency test, we deliberately chose to avoid the interview format. For our purposes, an ACTFL-type Oral Proficiency Interview (OPI) is not a practical option since in each round of competency assessment we have a potentially large number of students to test in a short time period. Besides, as Shohamy points out (52), the interview format does not necessarily represent the most typical sort of social interaction a student is likely to encounter in the foreign country. Moreover, the “communicative burden”—defined by Lee and VanPatten (179) as “the responsibility of an individual test taker to initiate, respond, manage, and negotiate an oral event”—is less onerous in the video format than interview. By the time they take the competency test, finally, students have been exposed to this format through exercises on the Student Activity CD-ROM that accompanies their textbook, *Chez Nous*.<sup>15</sup>

The theme of the competency video (food, eating out) was selected based on students' interests and as one that is systematically covered in a wide variety of foreign language

textbooks. Since the competency test is a proficiency or “summative” test rather than an achievement test, the video does not sample from a specific chapter or lesson of a specific course

Fig. 5: Facsimile, French-language menu in the video section of competency test



**Le Resto Gourmand**  
**Cuisine Traditionnelle**  
 23, rue Manceau - 37042 Tours  
 Région Centre-Val de Loire – Indre-et-Loire  
 Tel. : **02.47.61.14.22** – Bernard Boisvin

**Le Resto Gourmand** vous propose une cuisine familiale élaborée dans le respect et l'amour des produits de terroir.

[**Le Resto Gourmand** offers traditional home cooking. We use only local farm products cooked with love and care.]

**Menu**

<p><b>Nos Salades</b></p> <p>Assiette de crudités maison                  Salade de chèvre chaud                  Salade de tomates au jambon cru                  Anchois marinés au vinaigre</p> <p><b>Nos Poissons</b></p> <p>Filet de sole au jus de citron                  Sardines grillées                  Thon à la sauce provençale                  Filet de sandre sauce mousseline                  Saumon en papillote</p> <p><b>Nos Viandes</b></p> <p>Entrecôte au poivre vert                  Steak béarnaise avec pommes frites                  Poulet à l'estragon et à la crème                  Steak tartare à la mayonnaise                  Gigot d'agneau grillé aux herbes</p> <p><b>Nos Desserts</b></p> <p>Glace deux boules parfum au choix                  Pâtisserie maison avec chantilly                  Plateau de fromage                  Mousse au chocolat</p> <p><b>Les Boissons</b></p> <p>Pichet vin rouge ou rosé                  Bière pression                  Eau minérale gazeuse                  Jus de fruits                  Café</p>	<p><b>[Salads]</b></p> <p>8,50 € [Raw veggie plate]                  10,00 € [Salad with warm goat cheese]                  12,30 € [Tomato salad with prosciutto]                  12,30 € [Anchovies marinated in balsamic vinegar]</p> <p><b>[Fish]</b></p> <p>13,00 € [Dover sole with lemon sauce]                  13,00 € [Grilled sardines]                  13,00 € [Tuna with tomatoes, garlic and herbs]                  13,00 € [Pike perch filet with mousseline sauce]                  13,00 € [Salmon in parchment paper]</p> <p><b>[Meat]</b></p> <p>13,80 € [Rib steak with green pepper sauce]                  13,80 € [Steak with bearnaise sauce and fries]                  12,30 € [Chicken with tarragon cream sauce]                  13,00 € [Steak tartare with mayonnaise]                  12,30 € [Grilled leg of lamb with herbs]</p> <p><b>[Desserts]</b></p> <p>5,00 € [2 scoop ice cream, various flavors]                  5,00 € [Home-made pastry with Chantilly]                  5,00 € [Cheese plate]                  5,00 € [Chocolate mousse]</p> <p><b>[Beverages]</b></p> <p>2,00 € [Carafe of red or rosé wine]                  0,80 € [Beer on tap]                  1,80 € [Carbonated mineral water]                  1,80 € [Fruit juice]                  2,50 € [Cup of coffee]</p>
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**Toutes taxes et services compris** [Taxes and tip included]

syllabus.<sup>16</sup> Rather, we expect that a variety of teaching material would prepare students to pass this particular section of the test.

We chose a realistic situation in a cultural context that attempts to reproduce natural, “authentic” language usage. As in the I-M level ACTFL OPI, the video section’s role-play activity tests the student’s ability to survive in a situation she is likely to encounter when visiting the foreign country.<sup>17</sup> Omaggio Hadley aptly notes that “natural language *always* occurs in both a discourse context and an extra-linguistic, situational context” (*TLC* 2001: 396). We therefore enhanced the cultural and socio-linguistic aspects of the dialogue by carefully staging it within a natural-looking context. Visual cues such as maps and postcards of famous French cultural sights add extra-linguistic support, helping test-takers to generate more thorough and creative answers. Comparative analysis of student answers prompted in one case by a video with cultural cues and in the second case by a clip without them revealed that the first video clip’s close-ups of postcards and photos generated more specific and comprehensive student answers than a video lacking such visual support.

While the task proposed by the video is primarily communicative, some degree of formal accuracy is nevertheless expected. Instructions shown at the beginning of the video remind the viewer that “it is essential that you speak *clearly* and that your answers be *complete* and *thorough*.” A prompt inserted at the end of the video requests more complex language understanding and use: the test-taker is asked how long she has been in the foreign country and is prompted at the same time to use the present-tense construction with *depuis* (since, for). Although, to answer correctly, the student does not need to know much about the Meredith Study Abroad Program or the history of the French town hosting it, she does need to demonstrate some knowledge of the foreign country’s geography and culinary customs. For instance, the student who ingenuously orders *steak tartare* (raw hamburger meat) is likely to be ignorant of the true

meaning of this lexical and cultural item. While this likely “error” does not in itself invalidate the student’s linguistic performance, in combination with other elements of the scoring scale it may help determine the student’s level of proficiency. Similarly, a student who orders coffee together with a salad might be deemed culturally incompetent.

Within the framework of the competency test, the video is theoretically designed to be used at the end, for several reasons. For example, we reasoned that other activities—Reading, Listening, Writing—would provide a good warm-up for the more challenging Speaking sections. Speaking I is based on a series of visual cues that elicit very extensive responses, giving students opportunity either to showcase their language skills or to reveal weaknesses. By contrast, the tightly controlled format of the video allows little room for invention and creativity. As recommended by Lee and VanPatten, the oral section of the competency test thus “examines a variety of speech styles and functions via multiple formats” (184).

Students may find the video’s images appealing and its tasks manageable. When the video comes last, as originally planned, students therefore are more likely to “feel good about themselves” and to finish the test on a positive note. As in the wind-down phase of the ACTFL OPI, the back-loaded video is useful for “reminding [students] that they functioned well in the language.”<sup>18</sup> Alternately, one may argue that placement of the video before the other Speaking exercises facilitates the student’s transition from programmed to more complex Speaking activities. Pedagogically, it seems ideal to show the video at the end of the test, but technical constraints have led us to be flexible. We have found it more practical to put the clip at the beginning of the test so that, once the video has played, students are free to complete the assessment’s remaining sections at their own pace.

To facilitate a bias-free and reliable assessment of students’ oral skills, test-takers record all spoken answers on a standard audio cassette tape. These recordings are then graded blindly

by two raters. The total grade for the video section is 50 points out of a total of 200 (see Fig. 6). As noted previously, the video carries a heavy weight within the whole test because we want to

Fig. 6: French competency score sheet for the video section

<b>VIDEO</b>					
<b>Pronunciation</b>					
<i>Fail</i>					<i>Excellent</i>
0	1	2	3	4	5
<b>Vocabulary</b>					
<i>Fail</i>					<i>Excellent</i>
0	1	2	3	4	5
<b>Grammar</b>					
<i>Fail</i>					<i>Excellent</i>
0	1	2	3	4	5
<b>Fluency</b>					
<i>Fail</i>					<i>Excellent</i>
0	1	2	3	4	5
					Total: _____ x 2.5
<b>TOTAL VIDEO: (max. 50)</b>					_____ /50

ensure that our students can function adequately in the foreign language in a common survival situation. The video score sheet gives equal weight to four categories: pronunciation, vocabulary, grammar, and fluency. As recommended by Bachman (1996: 212), the scales are defined “operationally in terms of criterion levels of ability, rather than performance relative to other test takers or to native speakers of the language.” The lowest level of each scale (0) signifies “no evidence of knowledge or ability”; the highest level (5) refers to “complete knowledge or ability.” The relative weight of each category can be adjusted to reflect those skills whose acquisition is considered most important at the I-M level. If in fact the “speech profiles of learners” at the Novice and Intermediate levels “reflect primarily knowledge of



vocabulary and grammar,” as suggested by Omaggio Hadley (*TLC* 2001: 441-443), those categories can be weighted more heavily than the other two.

Bachman defines “language proficiency in terms of component abilities” and suggests that “we should attempt to measure these component abilities and report scores for these abilities separately” (1990: 329). Accordingly, our grading method is componential or analytic, not holistic or global like that of the ACTFL OPI. Moreover, our competency test also serves diagnostic purposes: we need to be able to provide specific feedback to our students to guide them to the appropriate “remedial” courses. Competency test results showed our students to be generally weakest in oral skills, and this finding led us to create an intermediate-level conversation course to remediate the problem.<sup>19</sup> Indeed, the most significant washback effect of the competency test is a heightened emphasis on oral proficiency in our teaching.<sup>20</sup>

In the video score sheet, the category entitled “Fluency” allows raters to distinguish between minimal and optimal answers. Thus a grade of 0 or 1 in this category is given to utterances that are fragmented or incoherent, or in cases where the answer is too short to judge. A grade of 4 or 5 rewards complete, thorough, specific answers, 5 being reserved for responses in which the student initiates an exchange, e.g. by asking a question or adding a comment. Pronunciation is important to the extent that the message can be understood by “sympathetic interlocutors accustomed to dealing with non-natives” (*ACTFL Speaking*).

The competency assessments include brief questionnaires that elicit student feedback on the user-friendliness of the test. Although students have offered definitely positive feedback on their testing experience, and although we have found test results to be corroborated by class performance, certain limitations of the video component cannot be overlooked. As a rule, the video format does not encourage the kind of spontaneous and active exchange that typifies the restaurant situation in a natural environment. For example, the video clip does not provide for

asking the waiter about the nature of a certain dish. From this perspective, a live interview might do a better job of eliciting questions and comments from the test-taker. Nevertheless, following *ACTFL Speaking*, we have kept in mind that I-M students “tend to function *reactively*, for example, by responding to direct questions or requests for information” (emphasis added). The controlled format of the video activity is tailored to take into account the limited abilities of these I-M language learners.

Even though the important language skills of socio-pragmatics and culture influenced our design of the test, they do not appear as individual scales in our scoring sheet. These components are difficult to test objectively and reliably in a controlled environment like the video. While likely errors such as the choice of *steak tartare* or of coffee and salad for lunch do reveal the student’s deficient knowledge of French culture, numerous test-takers may simply avoid the problem by selecting other items on the menu and in so doing fail to demonstrate active cultural competency. In other words, the video activity allows raters to diagnose student errors but not to ascertain effective mastery of an important skill. Moreover, unlike a face-to-face, role-play activity, the video format does not require or note the accompanying gestures and facial expressions that typically occur in the foreign culture. Though for the present we grade up and down on the existing score sheet, we will ensure that in the new version of the test, sociopragmatic and cultural proficiency figures as a separate category in the evaluation sheet.

In conclusion, some further challenges: 1) The evaluator receives no guidance on where and how to take off points when the test-taker fails to respond to a particular question. It is often tricky to determine if the cause of the student’s omission is insufficient comprehension, lack of concentration, or a technical glitch. 2) The test format may not adequately serve the needs of students with disabilities, who may require special arrangements. 3) A final difference between the video clip and its authentic counterpart is that, in a natural context, the “sympathetic

interlocutor accustomed to dealing with non-natives” (*ACTFL Speaking*) is likely to rephrase questions and statements if communication is not successful—a courtesy that our machine-driven video does not extend.

### III. Reading

This section explores practical issues relating to the assessment of Reading. It includes sample Reading tests based on current pedagogical theory and on detailed explanation of what to include and what to avoid when preparing assessments of Reading.

Reading is defined by VanPatten and Lee (2007) as an interactive process between the reader and the text. They cite McNeil (2007) to explain that this process involves “actively constructing meaning among the parts of the text, and between the text and personal experience. The text itself is [but] a blueprint for meaning.” Omaggio Hadley also sees second language Reading as an interactive process involving three elements—“the individual’s knowledge of the linguistic code, cognitive skills of various types and the individual’s knowledge of the world” (*TLC* 2001: 176). She agrees with Barnett’s view of Reading “as communication, as a mental process, as the reader’s active participation in the creation of meaning, as a manipulation of strategies, as a receptive rather than a passive skill” (*TLC* 2001: 177). For her part, Byrnes sees Reading as a receptive skill in which the reader “produces understanding” (78). All of these definitions indicate that part of the instructor’s purpose or goal in evaluating Reading must be to consider various factors which interact with and affect the reader, her process of understanding the text, and the text itself.

First of all, when the reader sees a passage, she relates its title or its first lines to some background knowledge or “schemata” about the article. In other words, she connects the texts

with any previous experience or knowledge she may have about the topic. For VanPatten and Lee, schemata “disambiguate, elaborate, filter, compensate, and organize information” (220). It is the “preparation or prereading phase” (228) of the instructional framework that should guide the learner’s interaction with a text. Thus, when choosing a text to assess Reading, the instructor must be sure not only that its topic is of interest to the students, but also that they have schemata to relate to in order to facilitate the reading of the text. For example, a person with a B.A. degree and who is presumably also paying off college loans will read “After College: two different lifestyles” (see Activity 2, Fig. 10) with greater understanding than a high school student who has not yet entered college. Students with a beginning or low-intermediate level of Spanish competency need to have some schemata about Colombia in order to recognize the grammatical elements of the sentence, e.g. verbs, adjectives, nouns. They also require a grasp of the meaning of some vocabulary words in order to answer easily the questions in Activity (or A) 3. On the other hand, an advanced student of Spanish may not need to have schemata about Colombia to answer the same questionnaire since she may readily recognize the meaning of most words. To help maintain a high level of student motivation, however, the reader should have an interest in learning about Colombian or world culture and/or the instructor should foster the student’s learning of world history and geography as preparation for A 3. VanPatten and Lee (228) cite Carrell to explain that since second-language learners already must contend with many challenges, the instructor should help students activate the schemata. Thus an effective test helps the student situate herself within the context of the reading by providing clear titles, instructions, illustrations, photographs, and short explanations.

VanPatten acknowledges the ongoing debate among researchers over the importance and subsequent impossibility of obtaining concrete samples of mental processes to be tested versus the importance of testing the knowledge gained by the reader. Thus he argues that “what is

Fig. 7: Activity 1, Reading

**Title: “Formas Diferentes de Pasar Vacaciones”**

[“Different Ways to Spend Vacations”]

Context of the Reading: Information about vacation preferences

Function: To test the comprehension and assimilation phases.

**Gloria Arias:** “Yo soy de Texas. Mi familia y yo viajamos a las playas mexicanas de Cancún una vez al año en plan de vacaciones. Compramos los pasajes por Internet y antes de viajar mi esposo y yo planeamos las actividades de cada día. Hacemos reservaciones en el hotel y en los restaurantes que queremos visitar. Pasamos tiempo en la playa y también visitando a amigos. Yo preparo las maletas una semana antes del viaje para asegurarme que llevo todas las cosas que necesito, incluyendo un botiquín de primeros auxilios.”

[“I am from Texas. My family and I travel to the Mexican beaches of Cancun once a year for our vacation. We buy the tickets on internet. Before traveling, my husband and I plan the activities for each day. We make reservations for the hotels and restaurants we want to visit. We spend time on the beach and also visiting friends. I pack the suitcases a week before the trip in order to make sure that I take everything that I need, including a first aid kit.”]

**Saúl Pineda:** “Soy chileno, y en mis vacaciones me gusta visitar a mis amigos en Europa. Compró el boleto en el aeropuerto y no llevo maletas, incluso compro mi cepillo de dientes en el aeropuerto. Me gusta la ropa italiana y hago mi primera parada en Italia para comprar ropa.”

[“I am from Chile, and I like to visit my European friends during my vacations. I buy my ticket at the airport. I do not take suitcases. I even buy my toothbrush at the airport. I love Italian clothes, therefore my first stop is in Italy to buy clothes.”]

**Laura Fuentes:** “Yo soy mexicana, en mis vacaciones me gusta visitar la selva amazónica, o los safaris africanos. Disfruto mucho mirando animales raros en su propio ambiente, fuera de un zoológico, y disfruto también lugares de mucha vegetación, alejados totalmente de la vida metropolitana.

[“I am from Mexico. I like to visit the Amazonian jungle or the African safari during my vacations. I enjoy looking at wild animals in their own habitat, not at a zoo. I also enjoy places with lots of vegetation, far from the metropolitan life.”]

**Braulio Ortega:** “Yo soy de Colombia. En mis vacaciones viajo en carro a las montañas. Siempre uso carros japoneses porque tienen mucha fuerza. Desafortunadamente tengo pánico a viajar en avión por esto no puedo conocer los Alpes suizos, ni las playas australianas.”

[“I am from Colombia. I travel by car to the mountains for my vacations: I always use Japanese cars because they have lots of power. Unfortunately, I panic when I travel by plane, therefore I cannot visit the Swiss Alps or the Australian beaches.”]

Fig. 8: True-or-false test for Activity 1

**True or false?** Indicate if the following statements are true (V) or false (F).

1. V F En las vacaciones Gloria pasa tiempo con sus amistades y parientes. [Gloria spends time with her friends and relatives during her vacation.]
2. V F Gloria prefiere ir de vacaciones a un lugar de clima caliente y donde haya actividades acuáticas. [Gloria prefers to go on her vacation to a place with hot weather and where there are water sports.]
3. V F A Laura le encanta visitar ciudades grandes y ver a la gente caminando en las calles. [Laura loves visiting big cities and she enjoys watching people walking on the streets.]
4. V F Saúl paga mucho dinero por exceso de equipaje cuando empieza sus vacaciones. [Saul pays lots of money for excess baggage when he starts his vacation.]
5. V F Braulio necesitará unas vacaciones muy largas si un día decide viajar a Suiza, ya que sólo podría tomar un crucero y una vez en Europa viajaría por tierra. [Braulio would need very long vacation time if he should decide one day to visit Switzerland, because he could only travel by boat, and once in Europe he would travel by land.]

**\*Preguntas inapropiadas**  
[Inappropriate items]

6. V F \*Cancún está en México. [Cancun is in Mexico.]
7. V F \*Laura Fuentes visita la selva amazónica. [Laura visits the Amazonian jungle.]

important in testing is not how a reader comprehends but what is comprehended” (VanPatten 262). We adopted this view and Wolf’s guidelines (260) for constructing test items to accompany the illustrations for the Reading assessment.

For A 1, therefore, the true-false items test general ideas as well as specific details (see Fig. 8). The student needs to read the whole test before answering. Accordingly, Item 6 is considered to be inappropriate because the student may obtain the answer through background knowledge, not by reading the text. Each item in A 1 also paraphrases information from the text

in order to avoid matching words in the questionnaire with those the text. Phrasing like that in Item 7 should be avoided since the student can easily look for the words *selva amazonica* in the text in order to obtain the correct answer. The first set of items for A 1 is also part of what VanPatten and Lee call “guided interaction” or “the reader’s exploration of the content.” They explain that “if activating appropriate schema can be thought of as building a bridge between the reader and a text, guided interaction is making a plan for crossing the bridge—and then crossing it” (233). These questions aim to assess whether the reader has focused on important information in order to understand the reading, and whether she has been able to break the text into various parts to manage the information.

That the first set of questions in A 1 requires a true / false answer leads to another important consideration regarding false statements, namely, the construction of these items should be designed to identify the student who has not grasped all the information in the text. In other words, true / false items should make some sense to this type of reader, but they must also include a red flag that the deep reader will recognize and discard as false.

Fig. 9: Second set of questions for Activity 1

**Second set of questions:** Give the name of the person described and explain your answer. Each person’s name must be used only once.

1. ¿Quién es una persona organizada? [Who is an organized person?]
2. ¿Quién no es una persona a quien le gusta planear ? [Who is not a person who plans ahead?]
3. ¿Quién es una persona en busca de lo exótico? [Who is a person who looks for the exotic?]
4. ¿Quién es una persona temerosa?[Who is a fearful person?]
5. ¿Con quién se identificaría usted? Explique su respuesta. [With whom could you identify? Explain your answer.]

The second set of questions in A 1 (see Fig. 9) therefore illustrate what VanPatten and Lee call the “assimilation phase [which] is the building inspection. You want to be sure that all the pieces are in place and that the experience of crossing the bridge [has been] memorable” (236). In other words, instructors should check not only the accuracy of students’ reading comprehension, but also what students learned about the text, what type of analysis they made, and what conclusions they formulated. As part of A 1, students associate a person’s name with a specific characteristic and explain their choice. Each student must also identify herself with one of the characters in the reading. Another option for testing the assimilation phase in this activity is to have students list the different personalities mentioned in the text and associate each personality with two characteristics. Alternately, the instructor can ask students to give advice to each speaker so they get the most out of their travel experience and / or overcome the limitations imposed by their personalities. Students can also write a set of questions to ask the characters in the text. The questions may address the activities and the goals they have in mind.

A 2 illustrates the reading assessment guidelines described above for A 1. In A 2, students read a dialogue in which Pedro and Paul discuss their lifestyles after college (see Fig. 10). It is important to emphasize here that the instructor’s purpose for assessment will determine the students’ tasks in the test. For example, if the goal is to test only Reading comprehension, answers should be written in the students’ native language so that the answers are not affected by students’ possible lack of written competency in the second language. In this case, the use of the target language for test instructions may not be necessary. This way, the learner knows easily what is expected and can concentrate immediately on completing the assigned task. Omaggio Hadley goes one step farther, stating that even the questions should be in the reader’s native language. It can be argued, however, that this practice provides hints that will help the student



Fig. 10: Activity 2, Reading

**Title: “Después de la Universidad: Dos Estilos de Vida Distintos”**

[“After College: two different lifestyles”]

Context of the Reading: Professional life after college

Function: To evaluate the use of present subjunctive vs. present indicative

**Pedro:** Hola Jaime. Estoy muy cansado. Trabajo 12 horas cada día. Necesito ir a Puerto Rico para descansar, pero no puedo porque tengo que trabajar.

[Hello Jaime. I am very tired. I work twelve hours everyday. I need to go to Puerto Rico to rest, but I cannot do it because I have to work.]

**Jaime:** Soy diferente a ti y vivo feliz. Yo trabajo 6 horas diarias, no tengo mucho dinero, pero disfruto la vida mucho. El dinero no es todo en la vida. Por ejemplo, mañana voy a Miami para visitar a una chica que conocí en la playa.

[I am different and I live happily. I work six hours every day. I do not have much money but I enjoy life a lot. Money is not all in life. For example, I am going to Miami tomorrow to visit a girl that I met at the beach.]

**Pedro:** Pero necesito el dinero porque debo pagar el préstamo de la universidad. Si yo no pago el préstamo voy a la cárcel. Yo debo pagar el préstamo de la universidad. Mi padre no paga mis préstamos aunque él tiene mucho dinero.

[But I need the money because I need to pay back the college loan. If I do not pay the loan, I will go to jail. I must pay the college loan. My father does not pay my loans although he has lots of money.]

**Jaime:** Debes comprar la lotería. Si tú ganaras la lotería, tendrías mucho dinero.

[You should play the lottery. If you win the lottery, you will have lots of money.]

**Pedro:** No tengo suerte. Yo nunca voy a ganar la lotería. Quiero pagar el préstamo pronto porque los intereses del préstamo son muy altos, si espero mucho tiempo, mi préstamo será imposible de pagar.

[I do not have any luck. I will never win the lottery. I want to pay the loan soon because the interest is very high. If I wait a long time, my loan will be impossible to pay back.]

**Jaime:** Pero necesitas descansar. Tú necesitas ir de vacaciones. Ven conmigo a Miami.

[But you need to rest. You need to have a vacation. Come with me to Miami]

**Pedro:** No puedo pensar en vacaciones ahora. Primero debo pagar el préstamo. El préstamo es lo único en mi mente en este momento.

[I cannot think of vacations now. I first have to pay the loans. The loan is the only thing on my mind at the moment.]

[Continues next page.]

Fig. 10: Activity 2, Reading (continued)

**Jaime:** No hay ninguna chica en tu vida, o alguna diversión, o pasatiempo?

[Isn't there any girl in your life, some other interest like a hobby?]

**Pedro:** Todas las diversiones vendrán después. ¿Cómo se llama la chica de Miami?

[All the fun will come later. What is the name of the girl from Miami?]

**Jaime:** No sé su nombre. Trabaja en un banco. Es alta con ojos negros. El banco está en la avenida San Martín en la playa. Voy a ir al banco. Si no encuentro el banco, voy a ir a la playa nuevamente a buscar a otra chica. Mi tipo de mujer ideal es morena con ojos verdes

[I do not know her name. She works at a bank. She is tall and has black eyes. The bank is in San Martin Avenue at the beach. I am going to the bank. If I do not find the bank, I will go to the beach again to find another girl. My ideal kind of woman is dark-skinned and has green eyes. ]

Fig. 11: Questions for Activity 2

**Questions:** Answer the following questions by giving a concrete answer. Use at least one verbal form in each one of your answers.

1. ¿Qué deseos tiene Jaime para descansar? [What are Jaime's wishes for getting rest?]
2. ¿Qué le dice Jaime a Pedro sobre el ritmo de trabajo de Pedro?  
[What does Jaime tell Pedro about Pedro's workload?]
3. ¿Qué le dice el papá a Pedro sobre quien debe pagar el préstamo estudiantil?  
[What does Pedro's father tell him about who should pay the student loan?]
4. ¿Qué opina Pedro sobre su suerte? [What does Pedro think about his luck?]
5. ¿Cuándo va Pedro de vacaciones? [When does Pedro go on vacation?]
6. ¿Qué tiene que hacer Pedro para pagar su préstamo?  
[What does Pedro have to do to pay his loan?]
7. ¿Hay algo triste en la vida de Pedro? [Is there anything sad about Pedro's life?]
8. ¿Qué tipo de banco va a buscar Jaime? [What type of bank is Jaime going to look for?]
9. ¿Cuál es el tipo ideal de chica que le fascina a Jaime?  
[What is the ideal type of girl that Jaime would love to have?]
10. Escriba las principales diferencias entre el estilo de vida de Jaime y el estilo de vida de Pedro. [Write the main differences between Pedro's and Jaime's lifestyles.]
11. ¿Cuáles son las ventajas y desventajas de cada estilo de vida descrito en su respuesta a la pregunta 10. [What are the advantages and disadvantages of each lifestyle described in item 10?]

understand the text, thus skewing the results of the Reading assessment. Clearly, the instructor has to examine the real purpose of the test.<sup>21</sup>

Some questions may require answers in the indicative (e.g. Question 1, 4 or 6 in Fig. 11), others in the subjunctive (e.g. Question 5, 7 or 8), all of which may challenge the test-taker to make the appropriate choice of verbal form and at the same time show the degree of mastery of Spanish verbal tenses. On this point, Omaggio Hadley says that language tests should invite students to use the language in context for particular purposes:

By including items that encourage learners to use the language they know to accomplish some communicative purpose, achievement tests [used to assess students' learning of material taught in class] begin to tell us more directly how students are progressing toward the development of usable levels of proficiency.<sup>22</sup>

A 3 is designed for a beginning-level Spanish class (see Fig. 12). It also follows the research assessment guidelines stated at the beginning of this section. In addition, this activity emphasizes that the purpose of the test determines the context to be used. As VanPatten and Lee state, "what a test looks like, then, is a direct function of what that test is supposed to do and for whom it is supposed to do it" (256). The purpose of A 3 is to test Reading and the use of interrogative words. With this activity, we also want to emphasize how important it is that tests reflect the methodology used in class.

Omaggio Hadley emphasizes that classroom tests should also reflect course goals and provide information about students' progress towards attaining them. Thus, A 3 is based on the communicative approach methodology in which the following conditions are met: 1) the class is taught in the target language; 2) all the information provided is contextualized; 3) grammar is not taught explicitly; and 4) students are asked to perform tasks focused on the meaningful message

Fig. 12: Activity 3, Reading

**Title: “Colombia”**

Context of the Reading: Some facts about Colombia

Function: Understanding simple description; use of interrogative words

Una vez que ha leído la información de cada punto, escriba la pregunta que se haría para obtener dicha información. Después agregue más información a la ya mencionada para cada punto. [Once you have read the information in each response below, write the question that would be used to elicit each response. Then add some detailed information pertaining to each response.]

1. \_\_\_\_\_  
Colombia está en la parte Noreste de América del Sur. [Colombia is in the northeastern part of South America.]
2. \_\_\_\_\_  
Santa Fé de Bogotá es la capital de Colombia. [Santa Fe de Bogotá is the Colombian capital]
3. \_\_\_\_\_  
Gabriel García Márquez ganó el premio Nóbel de Literatura en 1982. [Gabriel García Márquez won the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1982.]
4. \_\_\_\_\_  
Hay dos océanos en Colombia. El Océano Atlántico al norte y el Océano Pacifico al oeste. [There are two oceans around Colombia. The Atlantic Ocean on the north and the Pacific Ocean on the east.]
5. \_\_\_\_\_  
Álvaro Uribe es el Presidente de Colombia. [Álvaro Uribe is the President of Colombia.]
6. \_\_\_\_\_  
El café, las flores, las frutas, las esmeraldas y el carbón son los productos agrícolas más importantes que se producen en Colombia. [Coffee, flowers, fruits, emeralds, and coal are the most important agricultural products that are produced in Colombia.]
7. \_\_\_\_\_  
Shakira, Carlos Vives, y Juanes son tres cantantes colombianos famosos. [Shakira, Carlos Vives, and Juanes are three famous Colombian singers.]
8. \_\_\_\_\_  
La topografía colombiana es muy diversa, hay montañas, océanos, llanos, selva amazónica. [Colombian topography is very diverse. There are mountains, oceans, plains, and rainforests.]
9. \_\_\_\_\_  
Colombia tiene 38 millones de habitantes. [Colombia has a population of 38 million.]
10. \_\_\_\_\_  
El español es la lengua oficial. También hay varias lenguas indígenas como el inga, kamsa, huitoto. [Spanish is the official language. There are also Indian languages like Inga, Kamsa, Huitoto.]

and not on the language form. In A 3, students have to understand the complete meaning of each statement in order to complete the task. They also have to negotiate and interpret the meaning in order to decide among the several choices (or questions) they can express about each statement. For example, for Q 1 the reader can ask *¿Dónde está Colombia?* (Where is Colombia?) or *¿En qué parte de América del Sur está Colombia?* (Where in South America is Colombia located?). Some of the possible answers for Q 3 are *¿Quién ganó el Nobel de Literatura en 1982?* (Who won the Nobel Literature prize in 1982?), or *¿Cuándo ganó García Márquez el Nobel de Literatura?* (When did Garcia Márquez win the Nobel Prize for Literature?) or *¿Quién es Garcia Marquez?* (Who is Garcia Márquez?).

As part of the assimilation phase for A 3, students can be asked to mention locations in the United States that share some similarities with Colombia. For example, students might say that Washington State is located in the northwestern part of the U.S., or that the Pacific and Atlantic oceans are part of U.S geography, etc. Students can be asked if they are familiar with some of the statements mentioned in A 3 and prompted to provide information about what they know. For example, students might have read *One Hundred Years of Solitude* or another book written by Garcia Márquez. Students might also have tasted Colombian coffee or heard songs by a popular Colombian artist such as Shakira, Juanes or Vives.

This section has shown that assessment of Reading must have a clear purpose and follow specific guidelines so that students' test results can be measured according to course goals. In this way, Reading tasks can be excellent tools to evaluate learners' language competency and class methodology. All of this, plus analysis of students' errors, will guide instructors' preparation of class activities and indicate material that needs reinforcement while also apprising students of their progress in second-language learning.

#### IV. Listening Comprehension

Listening and Reading are often linked in research on the development of assessment tools. Like Reading comprehension, Listening comprehension requires the student's active mental participation to "produce understanding" and to "create meaning" (Byrnes 78). Omaggio Hadley identifies both as "highly complex operations that draw on knowledge of linguistic code, cognitive processing skills, schema-based understanding, and contextual cues." Like other skills, Listening and Reading both involve "problem-solving." In an effort to assign meaning to input, students first form hypotheses, draw inferences, and resolve ambiguities (*TLC* 2001: 179).

Despite these apparent similarities, important differences also exist between Reading comprehension and Listening comprehension, including the subject's comprehension strategies. In fact, the reader has several advantages over the listener in testing situations. Because a text is visible, the reader may predict its duration and organization at a glance, but these are impossible to anticipate in oral discourse. Omaggio Hadley also notes (*TLC* 2001: 181) that the reader has infinitely more control over the pace of the presentation than the listener, unless—as Joyner points out (1997)—the listener is working with a computer-assisted multimedia application. Just as the instructor takes into account both students' characteristics (interests, language level, disability, etc.) and their purpose in listening, she must also mind the intrinsic limitations of the oral format in the preparation of assessment materials. In acknowledging that a test's design reflects its specific purpose, VanPatten suggests (257) that the preparation of a good Listening test must consider the following three factors: 1) content; 2) task, i.e. how the learner is asked to demonstrate comprehension; and 3) the language of assessment. Thus, both of the following exercises are content-restricted, contextualized, authentic discourses closely resembling the kind of listening that happens in real life. Comprehension-check questions follow each passage.

For *Una oferta especial de la compañía Telefónica* (A Special Offer from Telefónica, see Fig. 13), the instructor provides a radio / CD player or video player (if the advertisement has been produced as a TV commercial) and advises students that she will assess their Listening comprehension following the announcement. She informs students of the number of times the announcement will be played and the task(s) they must accomplish after the final audition.

A pre-listening activity may now begin. Relying on cognates, the instructor uses the target language to introduce the theme of the exercise. Various kinds of pre-listening activities are appropriate for an in-class assessment. For example, the instructor may comment on the significance of the telephone and our dependence upon this technology, particularly as this preamble would not necessitate any departure from the target language: *En nuestra cultura el servicio telefónico es muy importante ¿verdad?* (Is it true that telephone service is very important in our culture?) Most students nowadays either have a cell phone or know someone who does. This being the case, the instructor may prefer to use personal questions instead, e.g. *¿Y Uds., tienen teléfonos celulares?* (Have any of you cellular phones?) or *¿Con qué frecuencia hablan Uds. por teléfono celular? ¿Con quién hablan?* (How often do you talk by cell phone? With whom do you speak? ). Students may take turns asking and answering these questions with a classmate. If the Listening assessment is part of an entry exam or competency test, a different sort of organizer would be appropriate. In such cases, the instructor might simply tell students they will be listening carefully to a radio (or TV) announcement, then state the title and function of the exercise. As before, since cognates predominate in the title of the exercise, there is no reason to depart from the target language. As another pre-listening activity, students could be allowed to view the questions in advance.

While it is true that this pre-recorded exchange would not qualify as unmodified, authentic discourse, it *feels* authentic nonetheless.<sup>23</sup> As mentioned previously, Omaggio Hadley

Fig. 13: Activity 1, Listening

### Una oferta especial de la compañía Telefónica

[A Special Offer from Telefónica]

*¡Atención, estudiantes universitarios! ¿Se cansan de pagar facturas muy altas por el servicio telefónico celular? ¿Prefieren ahorrar más dinero o gastarlo en otras cosas más esenciales como la matrícula y los textos? ¿Quién tiene dinero para botar? Durante el mes de septiembre se ofrecen grandes descuentos en toda la selección de equipo telefónico incluyendo los nuevos modelos de teléfonos móviles con excelentes planes que les permiten llamar por un gran número de minutos a precios muy cómodos - ¡ideales para nosotros, los jóvenes universitarios! Por ejemplo, por sólo \$20 se puede hablar por 500 minutos de lunes a viernes. ¡No hay que perder esta oportunidad! Venga a descubrir cuál es el plan perfecto para Ud. y sus amigos! ¡Servicio local y llamadas a larga distancia sin límite durante los fines de semana! Tenemos todo esto y más a un precio favorable ... durante el mes de septiembre ... sólo con La Telefónica ... ¡NUESTRA compañía telefónica para siempre! ¡Aprovechen esta oferta hoy!*

Attention, university students! Are you tired of paying high prices for cellular service? Wouldn't you prefer to save more money or spend it on more important things like tuition and books? Who has money to throw away? Throughout the month of September we're offering big discounts on our entire selection of telecommunications equipment including the newest models of cellular phones with great service plans, ideal for college students like us! For example, for only \$20 you can talk for 500 minutes from Monday through Friday. Don't miss this opportunity! Come and discover the perfect plan for you and your friends! Local and long distance service are unlimited on weekends! We offer all this and more – at a great price ... only at Telefonica ....OUR telecommunications provider for life! Take advantage of this opportunity today!

warns against the use of unedited material which “may create more problems than it solves” since unmodified, authentic discourse is often random in vocabulary, structure, functions, content, situation and length, making some of it impractical for (classroom) teachers to integrate successfully into the curriculum on a frequent basis.”<sup>24</sup> Following Ur (1984) and Dunkel (1986), she also cautions (*TLC* 2001: 188-189) that unmodified, authentic listening materials which are beyond the learner’s comprehension may only frustrate beginners and cause them to panic. This is particularly true of naturally occurring announcements involving fast-paced speech. In this connection, the instructor’s control of the pace of the announcement at the time of the recording constitutes an important advantage of simulated discourse.



This exercise emulates an authentic commercial in several ways. For a native speaker, the announcement is believable. The information in the announcement is meaningful and relevant to the target audience, the university student population. The nature of the announcement should be clear to the attentive student. The use of familiar, authentic expressions signals the nature of the passage both at the beginning (*¡Atención, atención, estudiantes universitarios!*) and at the end (*¡Aprovechen!*). Because she adopts an announcer's intonation to deliver and dramatize the announcement, the speaker *sounds* like a real announcer in Spanish. At fifty seconds, the announcement approximates a typical commercial in length and, like an authentic promo, hits only the highlights.

As soon as the speaker reveals her dialect and rhythmic, native speech pattern, the non-native listener will make the cultural connection that teens of both cultures often attend university and carry and use cell phones. Care should be taken that any visuals and background music are culturally congruent. If the commercial includes visuals, e.g., the announcer should appear as a convincingly dressed young person from the local Hispanic community. VanPatten recommends this combination of audio and visual, stating “in the real world, listening is only a part of the communicative system; rarely does one engage in ‘pure listening,’ that is, ‘ear-only’ listening, without the presence of visual or other stimuli” (122). An obvious exception is the radio promo, although one may also argue that today's students spend more time watching television commercials than listening to radio ads.

Depending on students' language level, the instructor may invite them to listen to the announcement more than once. Using the replay function on the radio / CD player, the instructor can segment the task, asking students to listen first for general content, then for critical vocabulary or key words, again to note other grammatical elements (e.g. all past-tense verb forms), and finally to demonstrate comprehension of the promo's context and meaning.

The comprehension-check questions test the student's ability to understand "globally," i.e. the main idea, recalling some but not all details. Because this particular discourse is an announcement, the instructor should expect the student to extract only as much detail as would be "reasonable" while listening to a similar announcement in her native tongue. VanPatten notes that "whereas a placement test might have all the items written in the test taker's native language, a classroom test might have them in the target language, particularly if all classroom instruction is carried out in the target language" (256). In an achievement test, students should therefore field and answer questions in their native tongue rather than in the target language so that the test assesses Listening comprehension exclusively, thus avoiding any mixing of skills. Accordingly, comprehension-check questions might include

1. What does the announcement set out to do?
2. Who is the target audience?
3. What exactly is being offered?
4. When does the offer expire?
5. What does the service cost?

The order of questions matches the ad's sequencing of material. By moving from the general to the specific, the questions also follow the student's deductive pattern of mental processing. As previously suggested, because a native listener focuses exclusively on the "globally significant" items in a promo, likewise an assessment using this type of discourse should stick to basic pieces of information. The nature of the discourse is suggested in the wording of Questions 1 – 3, which seek very general information. Question 4 is specific but critical to the listener's ability to use the information, e.g. to take advantage of the offer if she chooses to do so. As in the real

world, critical information regarding the offer's expiration occurs at the beginning and again at the end of the announcement.

Listening passages provide an excellent opportunity for students to discover the target culture. While the second Listening comprehension exercise (see Fig. 14) adheres to the same standard of authentic, contextualized discourse as the previous activity, it offers a richer cultural context. The instructor introduces the exercise by asking students to listen closely to a dialogue for insight into the Christmas tradition in Spain.<sup>25</sup> As they listen, students hear the Spanish dialect articulated by two native speakers, Julia and Roberto. These two friends reveal the cultural dynamic of close family ties, describe family members, and refer to an important facet of the Christmas celebration in their country.

The emphasis on Hispanic family values in this passage recalls VanPatten's distinction of "culture" and "Culture." The attention given to family—including the family of a friend—are noteworthy examples of Hispanic culture. Although here one discovers an awareness of the activities of relatives who in other cultures might be considered extended family members (and as such, less likely to occupy center stage), the notion of the "extended family" as set apart from the "nuclear family" arguably does not exist in Hispanic culture. The lunchtime gathering of all relatives further illustrates the distinctively family-centered Hispanic lifestyle. These subtleties leave an aggregate impression on the listener who should be able to characterize Julia's family as "close-knit," "caring," or similar.

The cultural reference to the Hispanic celebration of *Reyes* is both the basis for this dialogue and a justification of Julia's need to go shopping. Because the listener has received only enough information to orient herself to the holiday as it relates to Christmas, however, it would not be appropriate to test her broader understanding of this custom as evidence of her comprehension of the dialogue. Rather, the comprehension check should measure the student's

Fig. 14: Activity 2, Listening

### ¡Vamos de compras!

[Let's go shopping !]

Roberto: Julia, ¿Adónde vas?

Julia: Voy de compras.

Roberto: ¿De compras?

Julia: ¡Claro! Tú sabes, para mis sobrinos, porque estamos ya a finales de diciembre y todavía no les he comprado nada para el Día de los Reyes.

Roberto: Claro, Los reyes magos les van a visitar y les traen regalos de la época navideña. ¿Tú, qué crees que quieren los niños?

Julia: ¿Te acuerdas de Jaime? ¡Ya tiene seis años y le fascinan los deportes, especialmente el fútbol.

Roberto: ¿Jaime tiene seis? Entonces, ¿qué le vas a comprar? ¿un balón de fútbol o un uniforme nuevo?

Julia: Él, lo que quiere es un balón. Es un gran deportista. Se pasa todo el día jugando y tiene mucha energía. Le encanta jugar al fútbol con sus amigos. No es tan tranquilo como su hermana. ¿Te acuerdas de Elisa?

Roberto: Sí, ¿cómo no? La conocí cuando almorcé en la casa de tus padres. Es encantadora - muy artística, ¿no? Le gusta leer y dibujar ¿verdad?

Julia: Y pintar, y cantar ... y creo que quiere aprender a tocar un instrumento musical. ¿Qué le compro?

Roberto: Es fácil. Cómprale unos libros, o materiales de arte – un cuaderno para dibujar, tal vez.

Julia: Qué buena idea. Ven conmigo de compras. Sólo nos queda una semana antes del Día de los Reyes Magos. ¿Vienes conmigo?

Roberto: Sí con mucho gusto.

Roberto: Where are you going?

Julia: I'm going shopping.

Roberto: Shopping?

Julia: You know, for my niece and nephew, because it's already the end of December and I haven't even bought them anything for *Reyes*.

Roberto: Of course, *Los Reyes*. The wise kings will visit and bring the kids Christmas presents. So, what do they want the wise kings to bring them?

Julia: Do you remember Jaime? Well, he's already six and he loves sports so much, especially soccer.

Roberto: Jaime is six? So, what will you buy him? A soccer ball or new soccer outfit?

Julia: A soccer ball. That's what he wants. He spends all day playing soccer and now he needs another ball. He is so energetic and athletic. He's really social, too. He isn't as laid back as his sister.

Julia: Do you remember Elisa?

Roberto: Sure I do. I met her at lunch at your parents' house. She's really artistic, right? She likes to read and draw.

Julia: And paint! And sing! I think she wants to learn to play an instrument. What should I buy for her?

Roberto: That's easy. Buy her some books or materials for her art. Maybe a little book for her drawings?

Julia: Good idea. Come shopping with me! We have only a week left before the holiday! Will you come?

Roberto: I'd be happy to.

Fig. 15: Comprehension questions for Activity 2

1. What is the relationship between Jaime and Elisa?
  - a. They are cousins.
  - b. They are brother and sister.
  - c. They are schoolmates.
2. What is the relationship between Julia and Elisa?
  - a. Elisa is Julia's daughter.
  - b. Elisa is Julia's niece.
  - c. Elisa is Julia's cousin.
3. What is the relationship between Roberto and Elisa?
  - a. They are relatives.
  - b. They are roommates.
  - c. They met once.
4. Jaime could be described as:
  - a. athletic
  - b. studious
  - c. responsible
5. Elisa could be described as:
  - a. playful
  - b. creative
  - c. energetic
6. Julia's family could be described as:
  - a. close-knit
  - b. distant
  - c. adopted

understanding of descriptive adjectives, the vocabulary of the family, and the relationships involved. To accomplish this, one might either choose a multiple-choice format for the questions (see Fig. 15) or seek the same information with open-ended prompts, e.g. 1) *Explain the relationship between each of the characters revealed in this dialogue*; and 2) *Describe a typical day in the lives of Elisa and Jaime*. Provided that the language of assessment (i.e. the language of output) is the student's native tongue, the task of writing will not interfere with the evaluation of Listening comprehension.

A final form of comprehension check eliminates the linguistic response altogether. In a survey of Listening assessments involving a "non-linguistic" response, VanPatten includes the

Fig. 15: Listening, Comprehension questions based on pictures

**1. What is Julia getting for her son?**

- a. Here show a picture of an adult handing a boy a toy
- b. Here show a picture of an adult handing a boy a beach ball (or other)
- c. Here show a picture of an adult handing a boy a soccer ball

**2. What is Elisa's aunt helping her to accomplish?**

- a. Provide a picture of an adult female assisting a young girl as she puts on her shoes
- b. Provide a picture of an adult female assisting a young girl as she sets up an easel
- c. Provide a picture of an adult female assisting a young girl to fly a kite

**3. Which could be a true depiction of Julia's family tree?**

- a. Provide the scheme of two parents, a daughter, and a niece and nephew
- b. Provide the scheme of two parents with a daughter and a son
- c. Provide the scheme of two grandparents, two parents, and three children (including both sexes)

use of a student-generated drawing or the selection of a visual from among a set (258). The latter activity may be preferable, particularly if the student has limited artistic or graphic ability and / or lacks confidence in her ability to draw freehand. If a series of pictures is presented, the assessment could pose a question that corresponds to the passage. Fig. 15 suggests, e.g., that the instructor show three pictures per question. As noted above, VanPatten applauds the integration of both culture and Culture in Listening assessments. He states clearly that students must be held accountable not only for “that which was listened to” but also for “possible inferences about the society or people related to the content.” In other words, the listener should be challenged to perform a “mini-cultural analysis” (212).

The goal of ACTFL's Year of Languages is “to advance the concept that every American should develop proficiency not only in English, but in other languages as well.”<sup>26</sup> In collaboration with departmental colleagues, therefore, our efforts focus on the development of usable Reading,

Writing, Speaking, and Listening skills in our students. Because departmental course syllabus are more specific, because foreign language teachers increasingly focus on communicative skills rather than grammar, and because academic advisors across campus stress the requirement's importance, students know the College considers competency in a second language to be a vital, twenty-first century skill. Meanwhile, in our department we are assessing our teaching effectiveness in relation to the competency requirement and plan to add new contextualized assessments to future versions of our competency tests. As we have shown, we believe that only through the use of authentic, contextualized language in our classes can we prepare students to engage the world's diverse cultures and to find leadership roles there.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> When capitalized, these words refer specifically to language skills.

<sup>2</sup> Details of the curriculum are available on the Meredith College General Education web page.

Links on the page lead to information about the foreign language competency tests.

<sup>3</sup> *Meredith College Undergraduate Catalogue (2004-2005)*, p. 54.

<sup>4</sup> Meredith College Vision Statement (2004). The imperative reflects the vision of the American Council for the Teaching of Foreign Languages (ACTFL) for “a future in which ALL students will develop and maintain proficiency in English and at least one other language . . .” (ACTFL Standards for Foreign Language Learning: Executive Summary).

<sup>5</sup> Rivers 4-5.

<sup>6</sup> For example, the language of the official documents quoted above might lead the reader to surmise that we teach language not only to promote practical, personal communication, but also to support locally UNESCO’s goal of world peace. As stated by Leland Miles, “The challenge for the next century is to begin using language to inspire inclusion rather than exclusion, conciliation rather than conflict, and peace rather than war” (quoted by McInnis). This is not yet the case in our department—at least not in an explicit, organized way. See further McInnis’ comments on UNESCO’s Linguapax project.

<sup>7</sup> The term “global tasks / functions” follows Omaggio Hadley *TLC* 1986: 12-13. For French, we consulted our current elementary-and-intermediate-level textbook, *Contacts*, but one might also consult with profit, e.g., the “Language use” column in *Chez nous*, pp. vi-xvii.

<sup>8</sup> ACTFL *Preliminary Proficiency Guidelines—Writing* (Revised 2001).

<sup>9</sup> ACTFL’s Standards for Foreign Language Learning: Executive Summary states, “while grammar and vocabulary are essential tools for communication, it is the acquisition of the



ability to communicate in meaningful and appropriate ways with users of other languages that is the ultimate goal of today's foreign language classroom.”

<sup>10</sup> Madsen 120. Citing Perkins, Omaggio Hadley calls this approach “primary trait scoring” (*TLC* 1986: 337).

<sup>11</sup> The tip-sheet is available on the web page of the Meredith College General Education Program. The Writing section of “Improve your performance on the FL competency test” includes the following suggestions: “Review key vocabulary in your textbook by adopting a study method that works for you,” “Ask your teacher to assign exercises in your textbook/workbook that you can self-grade,” and “Use what you are learning when you do class Writing assignments or projects.”

<sup>12</sup> Students are taught to refer specifically to the subway station, e.g., *à Luxembourg*, not to the station's general location.

<sup>13</sup> Omaggio Hadley (*TLC* 2001: 395) uses “mixed format” while Valette (74) prefers “hybrid.”

<sup>14</sup> Omaggio Hadley *TLC* 2001: 399.

<sup>15</sup> We have further designed and produced a series of short videos based on the communicative topics of *Chez Nous*. Our *Causons un peu* program familiarizes students with the video format and gives them additional practice with their oral skills. A similar Spanish video, *Interacciones*, is based on material in *Sabias qué*.

<sup>16</sup> On “summative” tests, see Omaggio Hadley *TLC* 2001: 434.

<sup>17</sup> *ACTFL Speaking* explains that for “speakers at the Intermediate-Mid level [. . .] conversation is generally limited to those predictable and concrete exchanges necessary for survival in the target culture; these include personal information covering self, family, home, daily activities,

interests and personal preferences, as well as physical and social needs, such as food, shopping, travel and lodging.”

<sup>18</sup> Omaggio *TLC* 2001: 436.

<sup>19</sup> Intermediate Conversation in French (FRE207) aims to increase the student’s oral proficiency in French through review, practice, and diverse stimuli for conversation. The course content includes a structured review of the primary verb tenses and of principal grammar points, but its main focus is intensive practice in conversation based on reading of magazine and newspaper articles and viewing of several feature films. This and a similar new course in Spanish will be added to the undergraduate catalogue in Fall 2005.

<sup>20</sup> For departmental videos *Causons un peu* and *Interacciones*, see p. 12 and Note 13. Both programs use the “See ‘n’ say” method to train students for role-play activities. The department has also developed a list of detailed instructions explaining to students how to improve their oral skills (see p. 6).

<sup>21</sup> As VanPatten & Lee ask (2003: 261), “what does the test giver want to test: what the readers know and understand or what they do not know or understand?”

<sup>22</sup> Omaggio Hadley *TLC* 2001: 395.

<sup>23</sup> See Omaggio Hadley *TLC* 2001: 188.

<sup>24</sup> See Omaggio Hadley *TLC* 2001: 188. The disadvantages were first noted by Geddes and White (1978).

<sup>25</sup> The instructor may opt to allow students to view the questions before playing the Listening passage, since “consciously orienting students to the listening exercise beforehand helps maximize learners’ comprehension” (VanPatten 122).

<sup>26</sup> ACTFL “2005 The Year of Languages.” The web page states further that “Americans live and compete in a world of diverse cultures and races, a world where competence in more than one language is an essential part of communication and understanding.”

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