

Introduction to Oral Proficiency Levels Spanish

Part 1 Module 1.4

ACTFL Level: Intermediate High

Key Linguistic Feature: Tell stories about past events; keep discourse in past tense most of the time

1. Prepare to Observe

About the Intermediate High Level

Speakers at this level waver between the Intermediate Low/Mid and Advanced Low/Mid levels. Their proficiency may be hard to evaluate because they are able to speak at the Advanced Low/Mid level most of the time, but not consistently. The principal performance feature of the Advanced Low/Mid level is narration and description in past tense; that is, telling stories about past events.

Telling a story is a challenging task for learners of Spanish. It involves knowing and being able to produce the vocabulary needed to convey the details about the events and the setting. It also involves controlling the past tense: the verb endings (morphology) as well as when to use the preterite and when to use the imperfect (syntax). In addition to these linguistic elements, learners must appeal to their listeners by telling an engaging story—combining narrative and descriptive elements appropriately, building suspense, and making sure the point of the story is clear. Advanced Low/Mid-level speakers can manage all this at once, whereas Intermediate High speakers cannot. Some speakers give the facts in report form but provide no descriptive elements; others narrate and describe well but cannot keep their discourse in the past.

To read the full description of the Intermediate High level, see the [ACTFL Proficiency Guidelines for Speaking](#). You can also view video clips of interviews in English at this level.

Interview Questions

Speakers are rated at the Intermediate High level based on their responses to questions designed to elicit speech at the Advanced Low/Mid level. The interview questions encourage topic development by asking for clarification and details, and the types of questions elicit the principal performance feature of the Advanced Low/Mid level—to tell stories by narrating and describing in past tense. You may wish to examine speech samples at the Intermediate High to the Advanced Low/Mid levels together to see the difference between being able to tell a good story (Advanced Low/Mid level) and not being able to control all of the elements at once (Intermediate High).

Appropriate question types for speakers at the Intermediate High level include the following:

- Request for the story: *¿Cuál fue la experiencia más chocante para ti cuando eras joven?*
- Follow-up question to elicit more details: *¿Por qué? ¿Y qué aprendiste ese primer año?*
- Questions or comments to express interest: *¿Te chocó mucho?*

What to Expect

All Intermediate High speakers will struggle with the storytelling task, because it pushes them beyond the speaking level they can consistently sustain. But because this level, like all levels in ACTFL proficiency scale, encompasses a range of abilities; you should expect to find stronger and weaker speakers who fulfill the criteria of the level. Weaker speakers tell shorter stories, often pausing to search for words; they focus on the main story line rather than narrative or descriptive details. Stronger speakers may be more fluent, focusing more on the story line than on linguistic accuracy. As you watch the two video clips for this level, focus on how the speakers juggle the demands of narrating and describing in past time.

2. Watch the Interviews

There are two video interviews in this module, and you will be watching each interview twice. When you watch the first video clip in which John talks about a significant childhood event, you will notice that he hesitates as he searches his memory for a good story.

In the first viewing, focus on the interview questions, which are provided in the table below, and complete the column about Question Type.

Interview: John (topic - the past)

In the second viewing, focus on John's responses and write your notes in the third column.

Interview Questions	Question Type	Features of Response
1. <i>¿Cuál fue la experiencia más chocante para ti cuando eras joven?</i>	<input type="checkbox"/> Request for the story <input type="checkbox"/> Follow-up <input type="checkbox"/> Express interest	
2. <i>¿Tú recuerdas?</i>	<input type="checkbox"/> Request for the story <input type="checkbox"/> Follow-up <input type="checkbox"/> Express interest	
3. <i>¿Y no conocías a nadie?</i>	<input type="checkbox"/> Request for the story <input type="checkbox"/> Follow-up <input type="checkbox"/> Express interest	
4. <i>¿Y fue muy chocante? ¿Lloraste mucho?</i>	<input type="checkbox"/> Request for the story <input type="checkbox"/> Follow-up <input type="checkbox"/> Express interest	

As you watch the next video, you will discover that Elizabeth is a stronger speaker than John. She tells a longer story, provides more details, and speaks with greater fluency. You will explore these differences in the Analyze section.

In the first viewing of Elizabeth’s interview, focus on the interviewer questions, which are provided in the table below, and complete the column about question type.

[Interview: Elizabeth \(topic - the past\)](#)

In the second viewing, focus on Elizabeth’s responses and write your notes in the third column.

Interview Questions	Question Type	Features of Response
1. <i>¿Cuál fue la experiencia más chocante para ti cuando eras joven?</i>	___ Request for the story ___ Follow-up ___ Express interest	
2. <i>¿Te chocó mucho? ¿Todavía tienes la cicatriz?</i>	___ Request for the story ___ Follow-up ___ Express interest	
3. <i>Y cuando tengas hijos, ¿qué vas a hacer de diferente?</i>	___ Request for the story ___ Follow-up ___ Express interest	

3. Analyze Speaker Performance

Review of the Intermediate High Speaker

A hallmark of the Intermediate High level is inconsistency and struggle. Speakers at this level are on the border between Intermediate Low/Mid and Advanced Low/Mid. When asked questions that elicit functions of the Intermediate Low/Mid level, they respond confidently, fluently, and accurately. But when they are asked questions that elicit functions at the Advanced Low/Mid level, such as telling a story about a past event, they struggle to integrate the vocabulary, grammar, and story elements smoothly.

Their inability to put all the pieces together to sustain their language while telling a story reveals itself in different ways, as you have seen in the two video clips at this level.

It may be helpful to view clips of speakers whose performance on this task is at the Advanced Low/Mid level, so you can see how speakers successfully weave the elements together. For example, in Module 1.6 you can watch Advanced Low/Mid speakers Jessica or Laura talk about past events.

Questions for Analysis and Discussion

Refer to the descriptions of the Intermediate High level provided for you at the beginning of this module and to the notes you took while watching the video clips. Consider these questions on your own or discuss them with a small group.

1. A good story has narrative elements, descriptive elements, and evaluative elements. Evaluative elements direct the attention of listeners to the important parts of the story so they empathize with the teller and understand the point of the story. Does John's story have all three of these elements? Explain.
2. Does Elizabeth's story have narrative, descriptive, and evaluative elements? Explain.
3. Elizabeth makes it clear that she did not understand the interviewer's first question. She appears to interpret *chocante* as an event related to an accident. Does the misunderstanding affect the proficiency level of this speech segment?
4. Why do you think these speakers are rated Intermediate High? What are the weaknesses of their stories that keep them out of the Advanced Low/Mid level?