

Introduction to Oral Proficiency Levels Spanish

Part 1 Module 1.6

ACTFL Level: Advanced Low/Mid

Key Linguistic Feature: Tell stories about past events; keep discourse in past tense

1. Prepare to Observe

About the Advanced Low/Mid Speaker

Speakers at this level are relatively fluent and able to participate in conversations with groups of people. They need not rely on one-on-one conversations with a patient interlocutor (i.e. a conversational partner) to make themselves understood. They speak with enough fluency and confidence to take the floor for extended turns, as when telling a story. They are able to meet the demands of the principal performance feature of the Advanced Low/Mid level, 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, speakers 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-level speakers can manage all this at once.

Another function of the Advanced Low/Mid level is the ability to use communicative strategies to solve linguistic (usually vocabulary-related) problems. When doing a complex task like telling a story, it is common for speakers to experience lexical gaps—they do not know all of the words they need. Advanced Low/Mid-level speakers are able to paraphrase and circumlocute to compensate for their lack of specific vocabulary. For example, they use a general word rather than a specific one, like *animal grande* instead of *oso*; they may explain the word, sometimes relying on a cultural reference, such as *la comida favorita de Bugs Bunny* for *zanahoria*; or they may start a sentence over to avoid the unknown word. Their well-developed communication strategies enable them to keep their discourse entirely in Spanish.

To read full descriptions of the Advanced Low and Advanced Mid levels, see the [ACTFL Proficiency Guidelines for Speaking](#). You can also view video clips of interviews in English at this level.

Interview Questions

When a story is told in the context of a conversation, the speaker has the burden of keeping the listener's attention, but the listener also has responsibilities; specifically, to

insert comments and questions that signal attention to and understanding of the story, encouraging the speaker to continue. In a language proficiency interview, the questions should encourage topic development by asking for clarification and details. The interviewer may also offer comments to signal reactions of interest and emotional engagement.

Appropriate question types for speakers at the Advanced Low/Mid level include the following:

- Topic opener: *¿Has viajado a otros países?*
- Request for a story: *¿Cuál fue la experiencia más interesante?*
- Follow-up question to elicit more details: *¿Y qué pasó después?*
- Questions or comments to express interest: *¿No tenías mucho miedo?*

What to Expect

Advanced Low/Mid-level speakers can organize the facts and contextual details (setting, emotions, etc.), of their story, make the point of their story clear, and do all this while keeping their discourse in the past. Strong speakers at this level (Advanced Mid on the ACTFL scale) control the uses of preterite and imperfect (although there are occasional errors), whereas weak speakers at this level (Advanced Low on the ACTFL scale) tend to overuse the preterite in obligatory imperfect contexts.

Speakers with different language learning backgrounds—classroom learners, students who have lived or studied abroad for an extended period, heritage speakers, even native speakers—will have different linguistic profiles. The speakers in the video clips you will watch have different linguistic backgrounds. As you listen to them, focus on the features of their discourse that contribute to the effectiveness of their stories, specifically relating to keeping their interlocutors’ attention and using the past tense appropriately.

2. Watch the Interviews

There are two video interviews in this module, and you will be watching each interview twice. In this video Jessica talks about her trip to another country (Costa Rica). The speech segment covers two topics—the projects she participated in there and a significant event.

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

[Interview: Jessica \(topic - other countries\)](#)

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

Interview Questions	Question Type	Features of Response
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1. <i>Tú dices que has viajado a otros países hispanoamericanos.</i>	<input type="checkbox"/> Topic opener <input type="checkbox"/> Request for story <input type="checkbox"/> Follow-up <input type="checkbox"/> Express interest	
2. <i>¿Cómo te fue el viaje a Costa Rica?</i>	<input type="checkbox"/> Topic opener <input type="checkbox"/> Request for story <input type="checkbox"/> Follow-up <input type="checkbox"/> Express interest	
3. <i>¿Te mandaron a Costa Rica para excavar...?</i>	<input type="checkbox"/> Topic opener <input type="checkbox"/> Request for story <input type="checkbox"/> Follow-up <input type="checkbox"/> Express interest	
4. <i>¿Cuál fue la experiencia más interesante?</i>	<input type="checkbox"/> Topic opener <input type="checkbox"/> Request for story <input type="checkbox"/> Follow-up <input type="checkbox"/> Express interest	
5. <i>¿Pero había cocodrilos por todas partes?</i>	<input type="checkbox"/> Topic opener <input type="checkbox"/> Request for story <input type="checkbox"/> Follow-up <input type="checkbox"/> Express interest	
6. <i>Dios mío, ¿no tenías miedo después?</i>	<input type="checkbox"/> Topic opener <input type="checkbox"/> Request for story <input type="checkbox"/> Follow-up <input type="checkbox"/> Express interest	

In the next video, Laura (a Spaniard) talks about her experiences working for a summer in the United States when she was a college student. The speech segment covers two topics—the educational context that prompted her to go to the United States and what her job there was like, and a significant aspect of the experience.

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

[Interview: Laura \(topic - other countries\)](#)

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

Interview Questions	Question Type	Features of Response
1. <i>¿Has estado aquí antes, no, en Estados Unidos?</i>	<input type="checkbox"/> Topic opener <input type="checkbox"/> Request for story <input type="checkbox"/> Follow-up <input type="checkbox"/> Express interest	
2. <i>¿Qué estabas haciendo en esta época?</i>	<input type="checkbox"/> Topic opener <input type="checkbox"/> Request for story	

	<input type="checkbox"/> Follow-up <input type="checkbox"/> Express interest	
3. <i>¿Había una experiencia en particular?</i>	<input type="checkbox"/> Topic opener <input type="checkbox"/> Request for story <input type="checkbox"/> Follow-up <input type="checkbox"/> Express interest	
4. <i>¿Hablabas en inglés?</i>	<input type="checkbox"/> Topic opener <input type="checkbox"/> Request for story <input type="checkbox"/> Follow-up <input type="checkbox"/> Express interest	

3. Analyze Speaker Performance

Review of the Advanced Low/Mid Speaker

Speakers at the Advanced Low/Mid level, as you saw in the case of Jessica and Laura, are largely confident and fluent. When they run into difficulty in self-expression, they find alternate ways of expressing their meaning. They are comprehensible to interlocutors who may not be familiar with the speech of language learners, which means that they are able to participate in group conversations and talk about a wide range of topics.

In their stories they weave narrative and descriptive elements together, and they communicate to the listener why they have chosen to recount that particular event. The role of the interviewer is to ask leading questions to encourage topic development and inclusion of descriptive detail.

Questions for Analysis and Discussion

Refer to the descriptions of the Advanced Low/Mid level provided 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. Jessica tells two stories in her video clip about her time in Costa Rica. In the first story, she gives some background information. What was her life in the United States like at the time she took this trip? Where did she live and what did she do in Costa Rica? What is the point of this part of Jessica's story? (What impact did it have on her? What life lessons did she learn?) How does Jessica integrate these contextual details into the point of her story?
2. Jessica's second story is about swimming in (possibly) alligator-infested waters in Costa Rica. Recount the plot in simple sentences. Then examine Jessica's story for descriptive details and evaluation (the point of the story). Does Jessica provide sufficient descriptive detail to create an effective story? Does she state the point of the story clearly?
3. Laura is a highly educated native speaker, so her speaking proficiency in Spanish exceeds the Advanced Low/Mid level. Does this mean that her performance on the topic Other Countries is by definition higher than the Advanced Low/Mid level? Listen to her response again to help you answer this question.

4. The performance features of the Advanced Low/Mid level include narration, description, explanation, comparison, and giving instruction. How many of these features are present in Laura's speech sample? Refer to particular parts of her response as evidence to support your answer.
5. How might the interviewer have elicited Advanced High language features in these interviews?