

Introduction to Oral Proficiency Levels Spanish

Part 1 Module 1.2

ACTFL Level: Novice High

Key Linguistic Feature: Sometimes but not consistently maintain simple conversation

1. Prepare to Observe

About the Novice High Speaker

Speakers at this level may perform linguistic functions that range from the Novice Low/Mid to Intermediate Low/Mid levels. Their proficiency may be hard to evaluate because they are able to create their own meaning spontaneously in sentence-level discourse (Intermediate Low/Mid) a good deal of the time but not consistently; however, sometimes they fail to meet the communicative demands of open-ended questions and fall back to relying on words and phrases (Novice Low/Mid). The best way to understand the features of proficiency at this level is to view it as “almost Intermediate Low.”

A very good Novice Mid speaker—one who controls a large repertoire of words, phrases, and even memorized (stock) sentences—is still a Novice Mid speaker. To be rated at a Novice High level, a speaker has to demonstrate substantial, albeit inconsistent, control of basic elements of Spanish grammar (e.g., verb conjugations, word order) to produce sentence-level discourse and maintain a simple conversation.

To read a full description of the Novice 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 this level based on their responses to questions designed to elicit speech at the Intermediate Low/Mid level. The interviewer’s questions are largely open-ended, because these are the best types of questions to elicit the principal linguistic feature at the Intermediate Low/Mid level—to create meaning in sentence-level discourse in order to maintain a simple conversation. If the speaker is unable to consistently perform at this level, it’s an indication that the speaker’s proficiency may be best characterized as Novice High.

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

- Open-ended questions: *¿Qué te gusta hacer en tus horas libres?*
- Polite requests: *Cuéntame un poco de tu familia.*

You will also find yes/no and directed information questions in video clips at this level. As you watch the videos in this module, focus on the interviewer’s purpose.

- Topic openers: *Te especializas en español, ¿verdad?*

- Topic continuers: *¿Tú eres el hijo único?*

What to Expect

Interviewers can ask questions targeted at tasks at the Novice Low/Mid level or at the Intermediate Low/Mid level to evaluate speakers who may be in between – at the Novice High level. In the two interviews included in this module, the interviewers mostly pose questions that would work well for speakers at the Intermediate Low/Mid level.

Questions like *Cuéntame un poco de tu familia* are intended to elicit responses of several sentences that give information about various family members. What students choose to say is entirely up to them. Some may talk about their siblings and others about their parents; some may mention their parents’ names and ages, and others may talk about their professions; and some (but not all) may volunteer information about members of their extended families (e.g., grandparents, brother-in-law, nieces and nephews).

The interviewer asks follow-up questions to invite the learner to provide additional details. When the interviewer asks a yes/no question as a topic continuer, the answer is almost always “no”; it is natural in such moments to give additional information to correct what appears to be a misunderstanding on the part of the interviewer. You will see examples of this technique in the video clips in this module.

Speakers at the Novice High level sound like Intermediate Low/Mid level speakers at times—they give information in sentence-level discourse, they sometimes produce strings of sentences on the same topic, and they are sometimes able to maintain a conversation. But what distinguishes speakers at this level from those at the Intermediate Low/Mid level is their inability to *sustain* communication at the Intermediate level.

2. Watch the Interviews

There are two video interviews in this module, and you will be watching each interview twice. In the first viewing of Jacob’s interview, focus on the interview questions, which are provided in the table below, and complete the column about question type.

[Interview: Jacob \(topic - family\)](#)

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

Interview Questions	Question Type	Features of Response
1. <i>Cuéntame un poco de tu familia.</i>	<input type="checkbox"/> Open-ended <input type="checkbox"/> Polite request <input type="checkbox"/> Yes/No as topic opener <input type="checkbox"/> Yes/No as topic continuer	
2. <i>¿Ella es psicóloga?</i>	<input type="checkbox"/> Open-ended <input type="checkbox"/> Polite request	

	<input type="checkbox"/> Yes/No as topic opener <input type="checkbox"/> Yes/No as topic continuer	
3. <i>¿Tú eres el hijo único?</i>	<input type="checkbox"/> Open-ended <input type="checkbox"/> Polite request <input type="checkbox"/> Yes/No as topic opener <input type="checkbox"/> Yes/No as topic continuer	
4. <i>¿Qué te gusta hacer en tus horas libres?</i>	<input type="checkbox"/> Open-ended <input type="checkbox"/> Polite request <input type="checkbox"/> Yes/No as topic opener <input type="checkbox"/> Yes/No as topic continuer	
5. <i>¿Adónde vas, por ejemplo?</i>	<input type="checkbox"/> Open-ended <input type="checkbox"/> Polite request <input type="checkbox"/> Yes/No as topic opener <input type="checkbox"/> Yes/No as topic continuer	

Each level on the proficiency scale indexes a broad range, not a single point in a numerical scale. This means that each level encompasses stronger and weaker speakers, as well as speakers with diverse linguistic profiles. What is true for all speakers at this level (and this is true for the other levels also) is that their responses fulfill the criteria for the level, but not for the next higher level.

As you watch the next video interview in which Brian talks about his hometown, you will notice that Brian and Jacob are different types of speakers. In the analysis section that follows, consider aspects of their speech samples to understand why they are both rated Novice High.

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

[Interview: Brian \(topic - hometown\)](#)

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

Interview Questions	Question Type	Features of Response
1. <i>¿Tú eres de Houston?</i>	<input type="checkbox"/> Open-ended <input type="checkbox"/> Polite request <input type="checkbox"/> Yes/No as topic opener <input type="checkbox"/> Yes/No as topic continuer	
2. <i>¿Por qué es tan bueno Austin?</i>	<input type="checkbox"/> Open-ended <input type="checkbox"/> Polite request <input type="checkbox"/> Yes/No as topic opener <input type="checkbox"/> Yes/No as topic continuer	

3. <i>¿Y haces todo esto?</i>	<input type="checkbox"/> Open-ended <input type="checkbox"/> Polite request <input type="checkbox"/> Yes/No as topic opener <input type="checkbox"/> Yes/No as topic continuer	
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3. Analyze Speaker Performance

Review of the Novice High Speaker

Remember that the interviewers mostly used questions appropriate for Intermediate Low/Mid-level responses, with the idea that Novice High speakers can be thought of as “almost Intermediate Low/Mid speakers.” The hallmark of the Intermediate Low/Mid level is to sustain a simple conversation across multiple turns. To do this, learners have to be able to provide information about themselves—their families, interests, academic plans, and so forth. Interviewers typically ask fewer questions than at the Novice Low/Mid level, because speakers at the Intermediate Low/Mid level are able to assume responsibility for sustaining the conversation. Speakers who are able most of the time, but not consistently, to perform like Intermediate Low/Mid speakers are rated at the Novice High level.

Questions for Analysis and Discussion

1. Refer to the descriptions of the Novice High level and to the notes you took while watching the video clips. Consider these questions on your own or discuss them with a small group.
2. Look at the interview questions. Why does she ask Brian so few questions?
3. Watch the two video clips again. Write down one stretch of speech for each speaker in which they perform like Intermediate Low/Mid-level speakers. Then write down one stretch of speech for each one in which they fail to meet the criteria of the Intermediate Low/Mid level. Justify your responses.
4. Jacob and Brian are different types of speakers. Compare their speaking styles in Spanish. Does Brian’s (poor) pronunciation contribute to his Novice High proficiency rating? And does Jacob’s (poor) fluency contribute to his Novice High proficiency rating?
5. Brian talks about events in the past, using the first-person preterite verb form. Speakers at the Novice High level typically cannot keep their discourse in the past. Why is Brian’s speech rated at Novice High and not at a higher level? (You may wish to answer this question now and then return to it again after you have worked with speech samples at the Intermediate High and Advanced levels.)