

Introduction to Oral Proficiency Levels Spanish

Part 2 Module 2.4

ACTFL level: Intermediate High

Topic: Comparison

Prompt: *¿Cómo se compara tu ciudad con Austin?*

Features of speaker performance:

- Tell stories about past events; keep discourse in past tense most of the time
- Explain and describe in detail sometimes but not consistently
- Produce coherent discourse across groups of sentences most of the time
- Comprehensible to people who may not have experience with language learners

About 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 explain and describe in detail, they struggle to integrate the vocabulary, grammar, and structural elements smoothly.

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.

1. Prepare Interview Questions

Here are some sample video interviews of Intermediate High speakers. The topic is making comparisons. As you watch these videos, consider the perspectives of the speaker and interviewer by following the guide provided for you below.

- [Sample Interview: Elizabeth](#)
- [Sample Interview: John](#)

Speaker perspective: Start by listening to how Elizabeth and John respond to the prompt: *¿Cómo se compara tu ciudad con Austin?* Their language samples are good examples of performance at the upper range of the Intermediate level. The intended level of the prompt is Advanced, but the prompt does not clearly convey the need to organize the comparison between the two cities. Speakers who do not organize their response into categories of similarities and differences will most likely list (in sentences) points of comparison in random order, which results in a performance at Intermediate High (or lower). This is the case with the responses by Elizabeth and John. To fulfill the criteria of the Advanced level that are relevant to this task—detailed description; produce coherent

discourse across groups of sentences—you will need to organize your comparison of the two cities.

Now brainstorm how you might answer this question to speak at the Intermediate High level. You should start with a general comment, such as *Hay muchas diferencias entre Iowa City y Austin* to set the stage for what you are going to say. Then think of the ways in which the two cities are different: size, location (and effect of location on business or recreational activities), impact of the university on the city, the music culture (in Austin), and so forth. To demonstrate proficiency at the Intermediate High level, you can list the differences in a series of sentences and provide some details. You can end with a concluding statement, such as *Hay otras diferencias, pero para mí estas son las más evidentes*. Your interview should show an attempt to create a coherent, detailed description, but you needn't worry about developing any particularly sophisticated argument or thesis.

Interviewer perspective. First, listen again to the speech segments by [Elizabeth](#) and [John](#). This time, focus on the questions the interviewer asks. As you listen, write down the follow-up questions the interviewer asks and take note of how the speaker responds. You will see that the most successful questions (i.e., those that prompt the speaker to produce more language) are open-ended. They take the form of questions (e.g., *¿Por qué?*) or requests (e.g., *Dime más sobre...*). The least successful questions are those that elicit brief responses from the speaker. The interviewer's goal in eliciting speech beyond the Intermediate High level is to push the speaker to talk at length about the topic; it is the speaker's job to organize his/her responses into a coherent description.

Now work together to brainstorm questions that you might ask to follow up on the first prompt. Remember that your purpose is to encourage the speaker to produce detailed descriptions on the points of comparison that the speaker has chosen to talk about. As the interviewer, you should adopt the persona of a curious but uninformed conversation partner, someone who knows very little about the two cities. This allows you to ask the speaker to explain, clarify, and describe in detail. Most of your questions will be general: *¿Qué más?*; *Dime más*; *No lo conozco, ¿me puedes explicar más?*; *¿Y en tu ciudad?* Keep in mind that you will have to think quickly to ask questions that follow up on the specific content of what the speaker has just said. This means that although you can—and you should—prepare follow-up questions, you cannot just read the questions from your list. Instead, you will have to modify your questions and/or prepare new ones on the spot so that the resulting speech segment sounds like a coherent conversation.

2. Produce the Interview

Working in pairs or small groups, the interviewer asks the prompt and the follow-up questions, and the speaker responds. Record your speech segment on video, if possible; if not, audio is acceptable. (It is easier to transcribe from video.) Aim for a segment that is 1–2 minutes in length. Put away your notes from the preparation phase; you should not

use any notes during the interview, so that your interaction will be natural and spontaneous.

After producing the interview, working together to **transcribe the speech segment**. To see the relationship between interviewer questions and speaker responses, it is helpful to lay out your text as follows:

Interviewer	Speaker
<i>¿Cómo se compara tu ciudad con Austin?</i>	Response
Follow-up question 1 (Question type?)	Response
Follow-up question 2 (Question type?)	Response
etc.	etc.

3. Evaluate the Speaker

Looking only at the speaker's performance, and keeping in mind the linguistic features associated with this level, discuss the following:

- Does the speaker produce comparisons that would be comprehensible to someone who is unfamiliar with the two cities?
- Is the response substantial (lots of information)?
- Does the response present a coherent picture of the differences between the two cities?
- Is the speaker able to produce additional information in response to the follow-up questions?
- Is the speaker able to link sentences together to form more complex expressions?
- Are the basics of the grammar (verb endings, comparison expressions, agreement, etc.) correct almost all of the time?
- Does the speaker control the vocabulary needed to talk about the two cities?
- Does the speaker organize the description logically and coherently?

What proficiency level do you give to the response? Select among the following and justify your choice with evidence from the speech sample:

- **Below Intermediate High:** Gives information about the two cities, but the element of comparison is present only minimally.
- **Intermediate High:** Provides substantial information about the two cities and makes comparisons, but not in a fully coherent and organized fashion.
- **Advanced Low/Mid:** Fulfills the criteria for the task, and does so with ease and fluency most of the time. May not produce a lot of language at times. Produces or attempts to produce a coherent description that focuses on similarities and/or differences between the two cities.

4. Analyze the Interviewer

Now consider the interviewer's performance. Looking at the questions the interviewer asked, discuss the following questions:

- Does the interviewer ask open-ended follow-up questions?
- If the interviewer asks closed-ended questions, do they serve to open up a new topic (e.g., *¿Son populares los deportes acuáticos?* [yes/no question] *¿Qué más se hace en tu ciudad para divertirse?* [open-ended follow-up question])
- Do the follow-up questions fit logically with the content of what the speaker has just said?
- How does the interviewer bring the speech segment to a close? Is it accomplished smoothly? If not, what suggestions do you have for how the interviewer might have done so?
- Do the follow-up questions encourage the speaker to produce more language? If not, what problems do you see? How does the interviewer allow the speakers to demonstrate the extent of their proficiency?