

Introduction to Oral Proficiency Levels Spanish

Part 1 Module 1.1

ACTFL Level: Novice Low/Mid

Key Linguistic Feature: Produce words and phrases

1. Prepare to Observe

About the Novice Low/Mid Speaker

This module encompasses ACTFL levels Novice Low and Novice Mid. Speakers at this level typically rely on their knowledge of words and phrases in Spanish to communicate. They have little control over verb forms or other grammatical features that would enable them to form sentences. The sentences they can produce largely consist of memorized chunks, such as *Hay cinco personas en mi familia* or *Me llamo Scott*. Although they are not able to participate fully in a conversation, they can have short interactions with teachers and others who know to speak slowly and clearly, use simple language, and limit themselves to familiar, basic topics that lend themselves to making lists, such as family members, school subjects, weekend activities, and favorite foods.

The ACTFL Proficiency Guidelines are intended to apply to all types of learners—students in classrooms, immigrants who learn the language solely by using it in daily life, and everyone in between. As a result, the linguistic profiles of speakers at the same level may be quite different. In the case of speakers at the Novice Low/Mid level, however, there is much similarity among speakers.

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

Interview Questions

In the video to follow, you will see that the speaker has the intention to engage in conversation, the point of departure for all oral proficiency interviews. From there, the interviewer modifies the interview questions so that the learner can respond briefly using words and phrases.

Appropriate question types to ask speakers at the Novice Low/Mid level include the following:

- Yes/No questions: *¿Estudias en la Universidad de Texas?*
- Directed information questions that can be answered with a single word or a short phrase: *¿Dónde vives?* or with a series of words/phrases: *¿Qué deportes practicas?*
- Embedded choice questions, in which the answer is contained in the question: *¿Vives en una residencia de la universidad o en un apartamento?*

Because all oral proficiency interviews start with the assumption that a simple conversation will be possible, you may also hear questions that are designed to elicit the sentence-level spontaneous speech that is characteristic of speakers at the Intermediate Low/Mid level. Doing this helps to gauge the limits of the speaker’s proficiency.

Example questions:

- Open-ended questions: *¿Cómo es la Universidad de Texas?*
- Polite requests: *Háblame de tu familia.*

What to Expect

When Novice Low/Mid-level speakers are asked a question at their level, they often respond easily. For example, a speaker at this level may produce a series of words in response to a question such as *¿Qué deportes te gustan?* However, when asked to give information about a familiar topic in one or more sentences, the speaker is unable to do so. For example, in response to an open-ended question such as *¿Cómo es tu familia?* the speaker may continue to make lists, such as *Madre, padre, hermano*, or may put words together in an approximation of a Spanish sentence, such as *Mi familia es madre, padre, hermano*. Although these responses are comprehensible to listeners who are used to talking to learners with minimal communicative ability, they do not fulfill the criteria of “maintain simple conversation” or “communicate via . . . spontaneous language” that characterize the Novice High level.

2. Watch the Interview

You will be watching the following video interview twice. In the first viewing, focus on the interview questions, which are provided in the table below, and complete the column about question type.

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

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

Interview Questions	Question Type	Features of Response
1. <i>¿Cómo es Beaumont?</i> <i>Describeme Beaumont.</i>	<input type="checkbox"/> Yes/No <input type="checkbox"/> Directed information <input type="checkbox"/> Embedded choice <input type="checkbox"/> Open-ended <input type="checkbox"/> Polite request	
2. <i>¿Cuántas personas viven allí?</i>	<input type="checkbox"/> Yes/No <input type="checkbox"/> Directed information <input type="checkbox"/> Embedded choice <input type="checkbox"/> Open-ended <input type="checkbox"/> Polite request	

3. <i>¿Está en la playa?</i>	<input type="checkbox"/> Yes/No <input type="checkbox"/> Directed information <input type="checkbox"/> Embedded choice <input type="checkbox"/> Open-ended <input type="checkbox"/> Polite request	
4. <i>¿Está al norte de Galveston?</i>	<input type="checkbox"/> Yes/No <input type="checkbox"/> Directed information <input type="checkbox"/> Embedded choice <input type="checkbox"/> Open-ended <input type="checkbox"/> Polite request	
5. <i>¿Hay atracciones turísticas?</i>	<input type="checkbox"/> Yes/No <input type="checkbox"/> Directed information <input type="checkbox"/> Embedded choice <input type="checkbox"/> Open-ended <input type="checkbox"/> Polite request	

3. Analyze Speaker Performance

Review of the Novice Low/Mid Speaker

Speakers at the Novice Low/Mid level cannot spontaneously create their own meaning in sentence-level discourse in response to open-ended questions. A strong Novice Mid-level speaker has a large basic vocabulary, including kinship terms, colors, days of the weeks, rooms in a house, classroom objects, foods, and sports. A speaker at the lower end of the Novice Low level may have a vocabulary of fewer than 20 words. All Novice speakers can respond to directed information questions by producing single words or short phrases. They rely heavily on learned phrases, whether in a classroom or in another context of language use.

Questions for Analysis and Discussion

Refer to the descriptions of the Novice Low/Mid level provided and to the notes you took while watching the video clip of Natalie talking about her hometown. Consider these questions on your own or discuss them with a small group.

1. Look at the interviewer's first question (2 questions together). What types of questions are they? Is she eliciting a performance feature of the Novice Low/Mid level or of a higher level? Why does she start this way?
2. How does Natalie respond to the interviewer's first question? What signal does she give to the interview about her proficiency level?
3. Does Natalie produce any well-formed sentences in this speech segment?
4. How many different Spanish words does Natalie produce in this speech segment? How many of them does she repeat from the interviewer's questions? How many of her words are based on what she knows and can say on her own?