

Enhancing Chinese Speaking Proficiency Through Leveraging Higher Order Thinking Skills in ACTFL OPI-Aligned Activities

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Abstract

The ACTFL Oral Proficiency Interview (OPI) assessment serves as a widely acknowledged and reliable measure of an individual's linguistic speaking aptitude. Prioritizing Higher Order Thinking (HOT) skills in the creation and execution of ACTFL OPI-aligned speaking activities offers a profoundly effective strategy for cultivating students' oral proficiency at a higher level in the target language, both within and beyond the classroom confines. Speaking activities that are ACTFL OPI-focused enhance students' exposure to a wide array of subjects, fostering their communicative competence to encompass practical daily conversations as well as articulate argumentative discourse across familiar and unfamiliar topics. The present study delves into the strategic integration of HOT skills: analyzing, evaluating, and creating. For instance, within our weekly speaking club, students actively engage in discussions on contemporary hot topics. Each session, students assume different roles, such as the impromptu topic host (creating), evaluators (evaluating), master of ceremonies (creating), and speakers (analyzing). This multifaceted approach allows students to exercise their HOT skills and fosters a well-rounded language proficiency. This endeavor not only aims to enhance students' interpersonal and presentational communication competencies but also to cultivate their critical thinking abilities. Through drawing upon the experiences of a prominent California-based language institution, the present study will shed light on how these integration of HOT skills into OPI-aligned speaking activities and pinpoint on fostering peer learning and autonomous learning paradigms through these discussions.

Keywords: ACTFL OPI, Higher Order Thinking (HOT) Skills, Speaking Activities

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Introduction

Mastering a language, particularly for foreign language learners, presents significant challenges, particularly in oral communication, which demands not just vocabulary and grammar knowledge but also social interaction fluency. Achieving proficiency in speaking a foreign language is widely acknowledged as formidable. Therefore, this presentation aims to illustrate how Chinese speaking proficiency can be enhanced through the strategic application of higher-order thinking skills (HOTS) within ACTFL OPI-aligned activities.

Before delving into practical examples, it is crucial to understand why fostering HOTS is essential and how they can elevate language proficiency. Moon (2008) emphasizes that the development of thinking skills in education epitomizes its fundamental objectives. Similarly, Ku (2009) suggests that teaching for HOTS is pivotal in preparing students to critically engage with social issues in our rapidly evolving world. To attain advanced language proficiency levels, students must not only grasp language mechanics but also excel in inference-making, argument evaluation, and logical deduction. These HOTS must be cultivated through meticulously crafted activities and tasks. As Hashemi and Ghanizadeh (2012) assert, the cultivation of HOTS not only enhances learning skills but also significantly boosts language proficiency levels.

In summary, by integrating higher-order thinking skills into language instruction, we can empower students to excel in both critical thinking and language proficiency, equipping them for success in an increasingly interconnected global landscape.

Background Survey

Bloom's Revised Taxonomy

Thinking skills are commonly classified based on the level of cognitive processing involved, with certain types necessitating deeper engagement such as critical thinking, analysis, and synthesis. One of the most renowned taxonomies in this domain was introduced by Bloom in 1986. However, Anderson and Krathwohl subsequently revised Bloom's taxonomy in 2001. In the revised taxonomy, 'remembering' entails recalling or retrieving previously learned information, while 'understanding' involves grasping the meaning, translation, and interpretation of instructions and problems. 'Applying' refers to the ability to employ a concept in a new context or spontaneously apply an abstraction. 'Analyzing' involves breaking down an idea into its constituent parts to enhance comprehension and differentiate facts from inferences. 'Evaluating' encompasses making judgments about the value of ideas, whereas 'creating' focuses on constructing a new structure or pattern from various elements, emphasizing the generation of novel meaning or structure. Thus, the revised Bloom's taxonomy serves as a valuable tool for curriculum design and assessing learning outcomes. Moreover, it facilitates the conceptualization and promotion of higher-order thinking skills in teaching practices.

Why ACTFL OPI-Aligned Activities?

We have designed speaking activities or tasks that are aligned with the American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages (ACTFL) Oral Proficiency Interview (OPI). This choice stems from several key reasons. Firstly, OPI tasks underscore functional ability in spoken language, emphasizing practical communication skills essential for real-world interactions. Moreover, these tasks are proficiency-based, meaning they are designed to assess learners'

overall language proficiency rather than just their knowledge of vocabulary and grammar. By aligning our speaking activities with OPI tasks, we aim to cultivate students' intercultural competence, preparing them for diverse linguistic and cultural encounters.

Furthermore, designing activities in compliance with OPI tasks provides students with opportunities to engage with language in a low-stakes environment, thereby reducing anxiety and facilitating learning. This approach fosters an environment conducive to experimentation and exploration, encouraging students to take risks and learn from their mistakes. As a result, learners can gradually build confidence in their speaking abilities, paving the way for more successful interactions in real-life settings.

Additionally, by incorporating ACTFL OPI-oriented speaking activities into our curriculum, we aim to enhance learners' social interaction skills. These activities are designed to simulate authentic communication scenarios, enabling students to practice navigating various social and professional contexts. Through meaningful interactions with peers and instructors, students can refine their conversational strategies and develop a deeper understanding of cultural norms and etiquette.

In designing ACTFL OPI-oriented speaking activities, we employ a systematic approach that prioritizes proficiency goals and intended learning outcomes. Utilizing backward design principles, we first identify the desired proficiency level that students should achieve. Subsequently, we select language functions that correspond to the communicative goals of the activity, such as giving instructions, introducing oneself, or making requests. During the execution of these activities, we emphasize meaning-making over grammatical accuracy, encouraging students to focus on conveying their intended message effectively.

Furthermore, we tailor our activities to align with learners' interests and aspirations, ensuring that the content is relevant and engaging. Additionally, we address nonverbal aspects of communication, such as gestures and body language, recognizing their importance in conveying meaning and enhancing overall communicative competence. Through these strategic design considerations, we aim to create rigorous, authentic, and meaningful speaking activities that effectively promote language learning and proficiency development.

Practical Ideas for ACTFL-Aligned Activities and Tasks

There are 7 tasks that form the backbone of our class activities: introduction (covering family, occupation, hobbies, travel experience, and education), past/present/future narrations, instruction/direction, description (a person or place), role play, news and probes. These tasks encompass daily life transactions, social interactions, and professional scenarios, making them essential for developing students' speaking proficiency and fostering peer learning.

For instance, at the beginning level, we utilize self-introduction activities as warm-ups. Here, students simply discuss topics related to their personal experiences, helping them get comfortable with speaking in Chinese. In the second semester, students are given opportunities to elaborate on giving instructions related to their hobbies or providing directions to go to their favorite restaurant or public park. This challenges them to use more complex language structures and vocabulary while engaging in practical, real-life scenarios.

During the third semester, we introduce news and probes as a means to spark discussions, debates, and forums. This encourages students to express their opinions, share information, and

engage in meaningful exchanges with their peers. These activities not only enhance their speaking skills but also deepen their understanding of Chinese culture and society. For example, , students read a news article discussing how AI is expected to continue replacing some jobs. After reporting on the news, they are divided into two teams: one agreeing with the idea and the other disagreeing. Students then use evidence to support their respective positions. This activity not only stimulates critical thinking but also enhances higher-order thinking skills as students express their points of view.

Engaging in debates like this provides students with a valuable platform to practice and improve their Chinese language skills. Through structured arguments and counterarguments, students learn to articulate their thoughts effectively, bolstered by evidence and logical reasoning. This not only strengthens their language proficiency but also cultivates their ability to think critically and analytically.

Furthermore, such activities promote active participation and collaboration among students, fostering a dynamic learning environment where ideas are exchanged and challenged. By expressing themselves in Chinese, students gain confidence in their language abilities and become more proficient communicators.

Activities like these not only provide opportunities for language practice but also encourage the development of essential skills for academic and real-world success. Overall, incorporating these tasks into our class activities not only strengthens students' speaking proficiency but also fosters engagement in peer learning. As students' progress through different levels, they are continuously challenged to apply their language skills in increasingly complex and diverse contexts, preparing them for real-world communication in Chinese.

Sample Lesson Designed With HOT Skills

In the endeavor to cultivate higher-order thinking skills (HOTS) among students, a speaking activity implemented is the round table discussion. This pedagogical approach assigns students various roles aimed at stimulating their cognitive engagement. Following advanced reading sessions, round table discussions are frequently organized, centered around the day's reading material.

During these discussions, students are tasked with assuming different roles, including the impromptu topic host, master of ceremonies, speakers, evaluators, or impromptu topic participants. Each role carries unique responsibilities, allowing students to exercise their higher-order thinking skills effectively. An accompanying image illustrates the diversity of roles and functions within this activity.

A specific instance demonstrating the application of this methodology is the organization of a round table discussion following a reading class focused on the topic of "China's real estate as the government's monetary reservoir," featuring a level 3 commentary article. This discussion, titled "Future Trends and Strategies for the Chinese Real Estate Market," was conducted via Microsoft Teams' Class Notebook, with the objective of delving deeper into the subject matter and fostering critical analysis among students.

The agenda for the discussion, structured within the Class Notebook, encompassed the following components:

1. Opening Remarks

2. Introduction of Experts and Exchange of Views
3. Main Discussion: Analysis of the Current Status and Problems of the Chinese Real Estate Market

To ensure the smooth progression of the discussion, various roles were assigned to participants:

- Moderator: Responsible for guiding the discussion, facilitating communication, and ensuring the event's smooth flow.
- Experts and Scholars: Comprising economists, financial experts, policy analysts, among others, to provide diverse perspectives and insights.
- Industry Professionals: Including real estate developers, investors, brokers, among others, to offer practical expertise and experiences.
- Government Representatives: Officials from relevant government departments and regulatory agencies, contributing insights into policy implications and interventions.

Additionally, students were provided with key issues to address during the discussion, including the current status and characteristics of the Chinese real estate market, causes of real estate bubbles, risk assessment, and the intricate relationship between government intervention and market mechanisms.

This structured approach aimed to stimulate thoughtful discourse and empower students to critically analyze complex issues within the real estate sector, thereby fostering the development of higher-order thinking skills.

Interactive Peer Feedback

From the surveys, students provided valuable feedback:

The teacher moderated in a minimal capacity, enabling students to assist one another, and I feel more confident in my speaking ability as a result.

I particularly liked that the teachers let the students lead entirely on their own, which was great. However, when students got stuck or didn't have enough content to share with the class, our teacher filled in the gaps. I feel like that struck a healthy balance. The teacher didn't micromanage us, but she didn't leave us floundering either. This approach empowered us to take ownership of our learning while ensuring we had the support we needed to succeed.

Having to prepare for the speaking club, especially on the days when I was the presenter, put a healthy pressure on me to thoroughly understand whatever topic we were discussing that day. Instead of just skirting by and halfheartedly answering homework questions, I found myself delving deeper into the material. This not only improved my understanding but also increased my confidence in speaking about the topic. The responsibility of presenting in front of my peers pushed me to strive for a deeper level of comprehension, which ultimately enhanced my overall learning experience.

By assigning roles, providing guidance, answering difficult questions, and offering a unique perspective on many issues related to Chinese culture and history, the teachers played a crucial role in our learning experience. Their guidance helped us understand complex topics more deeply and navigate challenging concepts with confidence. Additionally, their insights into Chinese culture and history enriched our understanding and appreciation of the language. Their

support was invaluable in our language journey, and we are grateful for their dedication and expertise.

The opportunity to ask questions and discuss issues with the teacher and classmates while practicing speaking and listening to Chinese has been immensely valuable. This interactive environment not only allows us to clarify doubts and deepen our understanding but also enhances our language skills through practical application. Engaging in discussions provides opportunities to practice speaking fluently, while actively listening to others helps improve comprehension. Overall, this dynamic exchange fosters a more immersive and effective learning experience.

Allowing all students to share opinions on a topic helps create a dialogue that enables students to expand their thinking toward a certain idea or cultural topic. When every student has the opportunity to express their views, it encourages a diverse range of perspectives and fosters a deeper understanding of the subject matter. Through this open exchange of ideas, students not only learn from each other but also develop critical thinking skills as they consider different viewpoints. This collaborative approach to learning promotes a more inclusive and enriching educational experience.

She provided spot corrections and background information in the running chat for the classroom, which I found very helpful. I really appreciated when she would occasionally interject with information or her opinion on the topic. These additional insights added depth to our discussions and helped clarify any misunderstandings. It also showed that she was actively engaged and invested in our learning process, which was encouraging and motivating. Overall, her contributions to the conversation were valuable and greatly appreciated.

Conclusion

In conclusion, our study first addressed the importance of speaking skills among all four language skills, as it plays a crucial role in our daily conversations and forms the impression we make on others. Therefore, teaching this skill effectively is paramount. We proposed implementing effective technology and designing ACTFL OPI-aligned activities/tasks to achieve this goal.

With this approach, we have successfully enhanced our students' Chinese speaking abilities. Moreover, this approach has received positive feedback from our students. We believe a well-designed speaking club can be a powerful tool for language learning and peer collaboration.

Additionally, our study has provided valuable insights and practical ideas on how to integrate these tools into your speaking classes.

By incorporating an effective and well-designed speaking club as well as designing activities aligned with ACTFL OPI standards, educators can create engaging and effective learning experiences that foster improved speaking proficiency.

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