

Language Pathways: Connecting Heritage Learners to Federal Careers

Episode 7: Testing and Demonstrating Proficiency in Heritage Languages

[Intro music]

Francesca Di Silvio: Are you a learner of Arabic, Chinese, Korean, Persian, or Russian? Do you have a connection to these languages through your family or community? This is the podcast for you!

[00:30] Hello, and welcome to Language Pathways: Connecting Heritage Learners to Federal Careers. We believe in the power of multilingualism, and in this podcast series we'll discuss how your language skills can help you get hired and work successfully in the federal government. By sharing experiences that link language study to potential federal careers, we'll teach you how to leverage your language skills to get a fulfilling job.

I'm your host, Francesca Di Silvio. Have you ever wondered how you can show your language abilities? In this episode we're going to talk about testing [01:00] and ways to demonstrate proficiency in a heritage language.

Our guests today are Dr. Meg Montee and Dr. Meg Malone.

Meg Montee works at Georgetown University where she is the Director of the Assessment and Evaluation Language Resource Center and an Associate Research Professor. She also works at the Center for Applied Linguistics in Washington, DC. Meg's work focuses on using technology to assess language.

Meg Malone is the Director of Assessment, Research, and Development at ACTFL. She currently directs all assessment [01:30] and research for ACTFL's assessments, including the ACTFL OPI. Her current research focuses on student outcomes on national language proficiency assessments, language assessment literacy, oral proficiency assessment, the Seal of Biliteracy, and the development of shortcut measures of proficiency.

Thanks so much for joining us, and let's get started!

[Transition music]

Francesca: So, I will start with Dr. Malone. [02:00] Can you tell us a little bit about your background and experience working with language testing?

Meg Malone: I mean, that's a long story because I got involved in language testing almost completely by accident. I was hired to be a research intern at the first ever Language Resource Center which is a collaboration between Georgetown University, where I was a graduate student, and the Center for Applied Linguistics.

And what I realized while I was getting involved in it was that language testing is important [02:30] for a lot of reasons, but I'll just highlight two. One is that for research, it can tell you if you've answered your research question. Did they attain this level of proficiency? Did they learn anything, right? And then for teaching and learning, it gives you the same answer. What did the learners learn? What were the teachers able to get across?

Francesca: Great. And same question for Dr. Montee, tell us a little bit about your background and experience working with language testing.

Meg Montee: I started working in language testing when I was an intern for Meg Malone [03:00] and didn't know anything about it and found it to be a really interesting way of, as Meg said, gathering information, answering questions about teaching and learning. And as a career, I found it really challenging and helped me to engage in complex questions about linguistics and the things that I was learning as a graduate student when I started. So, in my job now, I make language tests and I do research [03:30] about how to make them better, how to improve them and I also help teachers understand how to use tests and use the results.

Francesca: Great, thank you. And so let me ask, in your experience, what are different reasons why language learners get tested or should get tested?

Meg Montee: Sure. Probably there's kind of two scenarios that you might get tested. One is you might get tested as part of your program. You might get tested when you come into that program. Right? [04:00] So that your instructors know where to place you, a placement test. They might test you along the way, to see how you're doing, how you're learning, and what skills you're gaining. Or you might take a test at the end to get a credential, to show that you've met the goals of the program.

So sometimes you're taking tests and participating in assessments as part of a program. And in other cases, you might take a test because you choose to, maybe you want to show [04:30] what you can do in the language to get a particular credential or as part of showing your skills for the job market.

Meg Malone: Another thing learners can really get out of the language test is understanding what reasonable expectations are for them.

Francesca: Dr. Malone, can you tell us, what is proficiency testing and how is it different from other kinds of testing?

Meg Malone: So, think about proficiency testing as something that just describes the extent to which you can do something and it has nothing to do [05:00] with how or where you learned it. So, let's say that you take an intro level language and you follow a certain textbook and so on. That's what we would call achievement testing, like when your teacher gives you a test at the end of the chapter to see if you've learned specific vocabulary words, maybe specific grammar forms.

But let's say that you go to Colombia, and you get off the plane and you need to fill out a document and talk to the people at customs. That's more proficiency. You might not have seen all those words before. You might never have [05:30] filled out a customs document and you have to write your name and figure out what it says, like *apellido*. And then maybe say thank you to the customs person or ask them to repeat something when you don't understand them. So that's what I would consider more proficiency testing, outside of what you've learned in the classroom.

Francesca: Okay, and Dr. Montee, anything to add to that? Tell us about proficiency testing, and what do results in proficiency tests really mean for you?

Meg Montee: As a student, proficiency testing can be so useful because if you get a particular [06:00] grade in a class, let's say an A or a B, it's hard for people to know what that really means in the real world. What can you do with the language? What are your skills? And so you can think about proficiency scales, there's different ones out there. In the United States, we typically use the ACTFL Proficiency Guidelines, that describes language according to Novice, Intermediate, Advanced, Superior, and Distinguished.

And these are meaningful descriptions [06:30] of what you can do in the language that have meaning outside of a particular class or program. So, proficiency testing is really valuable for representing your skills and abilities out in the real world, whether that's in an education program or to employers or in the U.S. federal government, it gives your knowledge and ability a standard way of talking about that that's meaningful to others.

Francesca: Let me ask you, Dr. Malone, [07:00] from the standpoint of a heritage language learner, how can testing be good for them?

Meg Malone: Proficiency tests are great for heritage learners because it doesn't assume that you start or end anywhere. A proficiency test can just find you where you are and identify what you can do with the language.

A language test can show you that you have this amazing skill that so many people, especially in the U.S., don't have. Regardless of what your score is, it shows, you know, that you have proficiency in a language other than English, and that's [07:30] terrific. The other thing it can do for you is help you figure out, if you want to continue work in the language and to grow in it, where your strengths are and where you need to work on things. So, you know, a proficiency test might tell you something like, hey you know, you're really good at reading and speaking, but maybe you need to work on your listening and writing a little bit more in order to have a balanced view or to use it in an academic or a work context.

Meg Montee: I think Meg's answer is exactly right, and I just want to highlight [08:00] the way that tests can be empowering if you're a student. Even if you're taking a test that's been imposed on you, you can use those results for your own growth and your own learning by understanding them and by, as Meg said, thinking about what these say about what you can do and how you can leverage that information to plan your own learning and to make decisions about your growth.

Francesca: Thanks, that's great. All right. So, now let's talk about specific proficiency tests. [08:30] So, Dr. Malone, can you tell us more about the OPI?

Meg Malone: So, I'll talk about the ACTFL OPI. The ACTFL OPI is what we consider in the U.S. the gold standard for oral proficiency testing. It's an individual interview between a person who has a certification in conducting the interview. It has four stages: a warmup where you just get to know the person. Then we get into level checks to see at what level your language is strong and sustained. And then at [09:00] what level your language starts to break down. We also do something called a role play, which the interviewer gives you a card and you kind of act out this role play in the target language. And then we have the wind down so that all of our learners end on a high note. The whole idea is that it's really like a natural interview. And it's supposed to be geared for the learners, that it's topics that they're familiar with and interested in, and nothing too uncomfortable.

And it's a really popular test. If you've ever sat down with your [09:30] teacher and they've started asking different questions and it seems to get a little harder, then easier, then harder, then easier, you may have gotten an informal ACTFL OPI.

Francesca: What are things that heritage language learners should know and think about when they're planning to take an OPI?

Meg Montee: One thing that is generally true from research is that heritage learners often are really proficient in speaking. Often, they may have a lot of exposure to spoken language. And so an oral proficiency interview [10:00] can be a great assessment for a heritage learner, because it can really allow you to show either what you've learned in school, or all the ways that you've gained and acquired language outside of a formal context, and get a test score that represents everything that you know and are able to do in the language.

I think it's also helpful to know some of the limitations of proficiency interviews, oral proficiency interviews and tests in general, if you're a heritage learner. It can be really hard [10:30] to measure the kinds of rich cultural knowledge that you have and represent that in a test score, and so that might be something you need to represent in other ways outside of an official test and an official score, if that's part of your background and part of what you bring as a heritage learner.

Meg Malone: I would encourage heritage learners to go into this and really show what you can do. If someone asks you a question, give them a nice, detailed answer, not just a short one-word answer. Because remember this interview [11:00] is to show your language, not necessarily what you know in terms of content. So, if you're asked about a book, don't just say it was good. Describe what had happened in it. Explain the characters, say why you liked it. So that's my advice to people taking an OPI, especially our heritage learners who are more familiar with speaking, take off, have fun with it, really show your ability.

Francesca: Great, thanks. So, switching topics to the Seal of Biliteracy, what should heritage language learners know when they're planning to get the Seal?

Meg Malone: [11:30] Really the Seal of Biliteracy was in many ways invented for you, for heritage learners, to recognize the language that you have that doesn't always get recognized in school contexts. The most important thing about the Seal of Biliteracy is that it considers languages other than English an asset and that is so important because they are.

The second thing to think about is just start early advocating for yourself. If you're a heritage learner who is not enrolled in a world language program [12:00] or any other sort of language program, people might not be able to find you. Go talk to your guidance counselor. And if that doesn't work, we know the people you should talk to. You should talk to English teachers; you should talk to other world language teachers at your school. You should talk to the head of the language department if you want to get the Seal, because those are the people who know about it.

Meg Montee: And particularly if your language is one that might not be that common, there might not be tests or assessments available that are easy to find and demonstrate [12:30] what you can do, it's good to ask questions. So, some questions you might want to ask are, how do I demonstrate what I know and can do in the language? What options are available for me? When should I take these in order to get the Seal for high school graduation?

And another thing that's good to think about is if you're going on to higher education, you can ask what kind of credit your college or university might give, or what ways do they have of [13:00] recognizing the Seal? In terms of further language study, placement, things like that.

Meg Malone: Absolutely.

Francesca: Dr. Montee, can you talk a little bit about language testing in the federal government? How is it used and what should our audience of language learners know about this process?

Meg Montee: I think it's helpful to understand that the kind of proficiency testing that we've been talking about is widely used in the U.S. federal government. The oral proficiency [13:30] interviews that you take in different federal agencies and departments are similar in a lot of ways to the AFTFL OPI that Meg Malone was talking about. And again, it can be powerfully tied to opportunities that you have available, to promotions, things like that. So, getting some experience with proficiency testing and knowing your ability will be really helpful if you are looking at a career in the federal government.

Francesca: [14:00] Let me ask you, are there any strategies you want to talk about for showing language strengths when applying for federal government jobs?

Meg Malone: First of all, when they ask for your language on the federal form, put it there and describe it. Make sure that you have documented that you have this language, and make sure it's on the form. And I would also say don't just put it on the form, make sure it's on your resume. Because that doesn't just show that you wrote down that you know the

language, it shows that you can do something with it. [14:30] So I just think you need to put it in as many places as possible so that people catch it.

Meg Montee: Also, if your score is based on the ACTFL Proficiency Guidelines, for example, then you can look at those guidelines or can-do statements that are associated with them, and that will give you some language to talk about what you can do in a meaningful way that's going to be understandable and describes your ability in that very general functional way. Often times focusing on [15:00] functional ability, things you can do in the language, is going to be really helpful for employers when they're thinking about, well what does this level or this score mean for my role? And what can this person bring to this position?

Francesca: Thank you! Is there anything else you'd like to add for our listeners?

Meg Malone: So, the federal government is one of the best places to work if you have proficiency in another language. Because there are so many different jobs that you can never even imagine that exist in the federal government [15:30] that *require*—and I do mean require—one or more other languages.

The other thing I really want to emphasize to heritage learners is how much of an asset your language is and that by documenting it, you are showing how important your language is, and you're making yourself and your abilities really attractive to future employers.

[Transition music]

Francesca: Well, that's all for today's episode of the Language Pathways [16:00] Podcast! Thanks for joining us, and a big thank you to our guests Dr. Meg Malone and Dr. Meg Montee for sharing their thoughts on using testing to demonstrate proficiency in a heritage language. Let's sum things up.

First, our guests talked about how testing, especially proficiency testing, is a way for heritage learners to show their skills in the language. Second, look into credentials like the Seal of Biliteracy, which you can use to get college credits and show your proficiency. Finally, jobseekers should know that proficiency testing is widely used in the federal government, [16:30] so it is very helpful to practice and get experience with this kind of testing and how to document and talk about your level of proficiency.

In the next episode, we'll continue to build connections between language learning and federal careers by discussing how to network and find a government job that uses your language skills.

To continue on your journey through federal career pathways for heritage language learners, check out the other episodes in this series. You can also find the resources we discussed and additional links in the episode description and on our [17:00] website. Thanks for joining us and see you next time!

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[Outro music]