

## Module 2: Understanding and Using the SOPA

### What are the goals of this module?

In this module, you will learn about:

- background information about the SOPA and oral proficiency assessment
- the structure of the SOPA; and
- how you can use the SOPA in your program.

### Part 1: The Student Oral Proficiency Assessment (SOPA)

#### What is the purpose of the SOPA?

The Student Oral Proficiency Assessment, called SOPA for short, is a tool to assess the speaking and listening proficiency of learners of any language in grades PreK through 8. A trained administrator follows a script to administer a series of tasks to a pair of students and each student receives a rating in speaking and listening.

[Click here to watch a video to learn more about the SOPA and the SOPA Training Program.](#)

“Hello! Welcome to the SOPA Training Program. My name is Elyssa Sun, and I am an Associate Project Manager at the Center for Applied Linguistics, or CAL for short. I’m here to talk to you about the SOPA.

SOPA stands for Student Oral Proficiency Assessment. It is a tool that uses a variety of tasks to assess PreK-8 language learners’ speaking and listening proficiency according to the ACTFL Proficiency Guidelines.

During the assessment, a trained administrator follows a script to administer a series of interactive tasks to pairs of students, allowing them to show what they can do in the target language. Students are given a global rating in Speaking and Listening based on their performance across the entire assessment. Now before I tell you more about the SOPA, first let’s watch a short clip of the SOPA in action.

Now some of you may have used CAL’s assessments for early language learners in the past.

We originally developed the SOPA for use with students in grades 1-8, and then created the Early Language Listening and Oral Proficiency Assessment, or ELLOPA, for students in grades PreK-2.

In 2020, CAL received funding from a U.S. Department of Education Title VI International Research and Studies grant to develop a new computer-based training program for administrators and raters of these assessments. Based on user feedback collected during this project, CAL decided to collapse the SOPA and ELLOPA into a single assessment under the SOPA name. The updated Student Oral Proficiency Assessment is designed for PreK-8 students in language programs in the United States. The SOPA can be used in traditional world language programs, dual language or immersion programs, heritage language programs, and Indigenous language programs and it can be adapted for use with any target language. The SOPA now includes two tracks of tasks for students of different proficiency levels, templates for each task that you can modify for your own context, and updated rating sheets that match these tracks and tasks. The SOPA rating scale was also updated to align with the 2012 ACTFL Proficiency Guidelines.

This training program provides all of the materials you need to use the SOPA for measuring your student growth and informing your classroom instruction. After completing the following modules, you will be trained on the structure of the SOPA, how to administer the assessment and rate student performances, and how to adapt the task templates to develop scripts for your own use. Thank you for accessing the SOPA Training Program to learn how to reliably use this assessment!”

[Click here](#) to learn how the assessment has been updated for use with this training program.

The SOPA was originally developed to assess students in grades 1-8 while students in PreK-2 could be assessed with the ELLOPA, or Early Language Listening and Oral Proficiency Assessment. Now, the SOPA is a single assessment for PreK-8 that includes two tracks of tasks for students of different proficiency levels and templates for each task for you to develop scripts appropriate to your teaching context. The SOPA Rating Sheet is updated to match the two tracks, and the SOPA Rating Scale has also been updated to align with the 2012 ACTFL Proficiency Guidelines.

### **What does the SOPA assess?**

The SOPA is conducted entirely in the target language and is designed to allow students to say as much as they can and show what they can really do in the language. The SOPA tasks are designed specifically for young learners to elicit social and academic language at varying levels of difficulty. Students receive global ratings in both speaking and listening that reflect the highest proficiency levels they can sustain at the time of testing.

### **Why should I assess oral proficiency?**

Oral proficiency is defined by Omaggio (1986) as the ability to communicate verbally in a functional and accurate way in the target language, and a high degree of oral proficiency implies that a person can apply linguistic knowledge to new contexts and situations.

Effective oral proficiency assessment demonstrates what students can do with the target language which helps educators to support and enhance instruction and student learning and also shows students how well they can communicate orally in authentic real-life situations. Assessments given over time can also demonstrate progress in language development.

[Omaggio, A. (1986). *Teaching Language in Context: Proficiency-Oriented Instruction*. Boston, MA: Heinle & Heinle.]

### **What is the design of the SOPA?**

[Click on each bar](#) to learn more.

The SOPA uses an interview format in which a pair of students of similar proficiency levels are assessed in a friendly and conversational environment. The SOPA is typically administered to pairs of students by a trained administrator and a trained rater. The administrator primarily conducts the assessment by following the scripts for each task. The rater primarily takes notes and assigns ratings during the assessment and is also in charge of video recording.

The SOPA has two tracks, or sequenced series of tasks, that begin with an easy activity that students can complete successfully, increase gradually in difficulty, extend just beyond the students’ comfort level to check if their highest proficiency levels have been demonstrated, then return to an easier activity at

their comfort level to wind down the assessment. While both tracks follow this progression of tasks, Track 2 includes more tasks and can measure a higher level of proficiency than Track 1.

The SOPA design allows for flexibility and customization to meet the needs of your program and your students. The SOPA task templates are used to create scripts that reflect your curriculum and the students to be assessed. For each SOPA administration, you determine student pairings and select the SOPA track in advance. Within each track, the task templates include directions for probing for students' highest levels of proficiency and options to adjust questions and end the assessment based on student responses. In addition, SOPA administrations can be recorded to facilitate and verify rating.

### **What are the ACTFL Proficiency Guidelines?**

The ACTFL Proficiency Guidelines have been widely used to evaluate the skills of language learners in U.S. schools. The guidelines describe what people can do with the language in real-world spontaneous situations in speaking, writing, listening, and reading at five major levels of proficiency: Distinguished, Superior, Advanced, Intermediate, and Novice. The levels Advanced, Intermediate, and Novice are subdivided into High, Mid, and Low levels. Click on each level to learn more.

- Novice: Students at this level are able to produce isolated words, memorized phrases, and short messages about highly predictable, everyday topics. They may be difficult to understand.
- Intermediate: Students at this level are able to create more with the language and communicate about familiar topics related to their daily lives using sentence-level discourse.
- Advanced: Students at this level engage in conversation in a clearly participatory manner and are able to narrate, describe, and communicate about a variety of concrete topics using paragraph-level discourse.
- Superior: Students at this level are able to communicate with accuracy and fluency, providing opinions and hypotheses about a variety of concrete and abstract topics using extended discourse.
- Distinguished: Students at this level are able to communicate skillfully with accuracy, efficiency, and effectiveness, and produce highly sophisticated and tightly organized extended discourse.

More information and the full text of the Guidelines is provided on the ACTFL website:

<https://www.actfl.org/educator-resources/actfl-proficiency-guidelines>

### **Which levels of proficiency does the SOPA assess?**

Performances on the SOPA are rated for speaking and listening on a scale from Novice Low to Advanced High based on the ACTFL Proficiency Guidelines. Each SOPA task is designed to elicit language within a range of proficiency levels. A global rating is determined based on the highest level of language the student is able to sustainably produce and understand during the assessment.

### **Reflection/Discussion**

The following questions are designed to help you reflect on what you have learned so far in this module. If you are completing this module in a group, you can discuss these questions with your colleagues and share your insights and experiences.

The questions for reflection and discussion are:

- Why do you assess your students? What do you learn from assessments?

- What kinds of tools have you used to assess your students' oral proficiency? What do you like about these tools and what could be improved?
- What elements of the SOPA design do you think will work well for your students?

### Check for learning

Complete the following check for learning to see what you have learned in this part of the module. After answering each question, click submit to check your answer against the expected response. You will have two opportunities to answer the questions correctly, and if you do not answer correctly, you will see the correct response before being prompted to move on to the next questions.

1. For which full range of grade levels is the SOPA an appropriate assessment?
2. True or False: The SOPA is administered to two students at the same time.
3. What is the highest level of proficiency rating possible on the SOPA?

### Part 2: Using the SOPA

#### How can I adapt the SOPA for my program?

The SOPA can be administered in any language and used in traditional world language programs, including FLES programs, as well as dual language, immersion, heritage language, and Indigenous language programs designed for young learners up to Grade 8.

The SOPA can be adapted in multiple ways to meet the needs of your program:

- Use the task templates to create task scripts in the target language that reflect your curriculum, performance objectives, and student interests.
- Select supporting materials that are engaging and appropriate for the age and developmental levels of your students.
- Pair students and select the SOPA track for administration based on expected proficiency levels.
- Implement administration and rating procedures that are practical for your program. We will share more information about modifications that can be made in Module 5 of the training program.

#### When can I administer the SOPA?

When the SOPA is administered annually, students' ratings are expected to reveal gradual progress in the target language. The amount of progress depends on many factors, such as the type of program, frequency of instruction, exposure to the language outside of the classroom, and student motivation. It is important to consider these factors and the goals of your program in choosing when and how often to administer the SOPA.

The SOPA is often administered at the beginning of a course or program or after students have completed a course or program. Although the SOPA can be used with students in any grade PreK-8, which grade levels to assess is a decision to be made by your language program or school district based on your purposes for assessment.

Some programs may want to administer the SOPA to students in all grades, while other programs may choose to only administer the SOPA to students in some grades and not all.

For example, if your objective is to gather baseline data for a new program, you may choose to assess students in the lower grades, while you would assess students in the highest grade to evaluate proficiency outcomes at program end. To determine how students are developing across the program and track individual student progress over time, you may instead assess students in grades 3, 5, and 8 or another combination of grade levels.

### **How can I use SOPA results?**

Results from the SOPA provide an evaluation of student proficiency in speaking and listening and rating justifications that can be used for reporting, giving feedback, and planning classroom instruction. SOPA results can be used to:

- support placement of students into appropriate classes or programs;
- assess student performance at the end of a unit, class, or program;
- inform curriculum development, instructional planning, and feedback to students and families;
- evaluate program effectiveness;
- communicate with various stakeholders about learning outcomes; and
- comply with accountability reporting requirements for your school or district.

### **What are best practices for using SOPA results?**

To monitor and report on progress, SOPA results should ideally be used in conjunction with other assessments and sources of information about student language proficiency. Because student performances on the SOPA give no indication of reading or writing abilities, a separate assessment should be used to assess proficiency in these areas.

By examining SOPA results, teachers can begin to pinpoint the areas in which their students might need more practice and make decisions about curricula, materials, activities, and learning supports. It is important to compare students' SOPA results with the results of other classroom- or program-based assessments such as quizzes, projects, portfolios, and other performance tasks to provide a more complete understanding of what students have learned and what they still need to learn.

### **Who can I share SOPA results with?**

You can share reports of individual SOPA results, which may include rating notes and feedback on task performances, with co-teachers, parents, and directly with students as appropriate for their ages.

It can also be helpful to share global ratings and aggregate results within your language program, with school administrators and district leadership, and even in the larger community to advocate for your program.

How you share SOPA results should be aligned with your purposes for using the assessment, for example for placement, summative assessment, program evaluation, or making decisions about instruction. SOPA results can be shared in various formats and levels of detail to different stakeholders to provide information about learning outcomes and give effective feedback for student learning.

### **Reflection/Discussion**

The following questions are designed to help you reflect on what you have learned in this section of the module.

The questions for reflection and discussion are:

- What are your main purposes for using the SOPA?
- Who are the different stakeholders who will want to know about SOPA results?
- What questions do you think your students and their parents will have about the SOPA? How can you share results in an effective way?

## Conclusion

### What did we cover in this module?

As a reminder, in this module you learned about:

- background information about the SOPA and oral proficiency assessment
- the structure of the SOPA; and
- how you can use the SOPA in your program.

### What should I do now?

Now that you have completed Module 2, you should think about your own reasons for using the SOPA and how you plan to use the SOPA results in your program. After considering why you are using the SOPA, you should think about who should be informed of the SOPA results.

Visit the SOPA Resource Library on the main website to download one-page information sheets about the SOPA to share with school stakeholders and with families under the “Resources for sharing information about the SOPA” section.

When you are ready, complete the Check for Learning for this module and then move onto the next module, Module 3: SOPA Tracks and Tasks.

### Check for learning

Complete the following check for learning to see what you have learned in this part of the module.

1. Which language domains does the SOPA assess? Select all that apply.
2. Which of the following groups may be interested in SOPA results? Select all that apply.
3. True or False: The SOPA tasks are pre-scripted and cannot be modified in any way.