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FEATURED THEME: ASSESSMENT USING CAN-DO STATEMENTS

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MICHIGAN STATE
UNIVERSITY

Can-Do Statements for a Basic Language Program

By Bill VanPatten and Walter P. Hopkins

As described by the American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages (ACTFL), Can-Do statements are simple self-assessment statements for learners to determine not what they *know* about language but what they *can do* with language. An example of a Can-Do benchmark statement for Intermediate-Mid proficiency is the following:

I can participate in conversations on familiar topics using sentences and series of sentences. I can handle short social interactions in everyday situations by asking and answering a variety of questions. I can usually say what I want to say about myself and my everyday life.

Anyone familiar with the ACTFL proficiency guidelines will immediately recognize this as a brief version of what an Intermediate-Mid speaker can do in interpersonal contexts. It is a broad statement, to be sure. When used in a language program, such statements can be useful for self-assessment upon program exit or to see if one is meeting a particular level of ability for some other purpose (e.g., job, study abroad, field research). Such statements are not particularly useful, however, for evaluation in a basic language course. ACTFL offers more specific Can-Do statements to isolate particular aspects of Intermediate-Mid proficiency, but as we will see later it may make more sense to take the spirit of Can-Do statements and formulate tasks that are context and curriculum specific.

What's the Problem with Traditional Paper and Pencil Testing?

To understand why we would want Can-Do statements in a language program as an evaluative measure, it is important to understand a basic tension in language teaching. On the one hand, we all believe in a proficiency-oriented, communicative program that is informed by second language acquisition including the role of input, the interactive nature of tasks, the role of individual differences, developmental sequences, the implicit nature of linguistic knowledge, and others. On the other hand, language courses are part of institutionalized education in which tremendous value is placed on numeric quantification. This numeric quantification is often met by paper-and-pencil testing of knowledge about language. And this paper-and-pencil testing often forms a significant part of a student's final grade. For example, at Michigan State University (MSU)—prior to the changes we recently made—paper-and-pencil tests formed 50% of a student's final grades.

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EDITOR'S MESSAGE

Dear Readers,

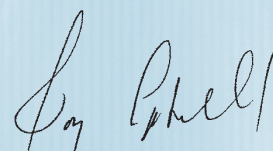
MSU's first home football game was last weekend, so it must be fall! I hope your school year is off to a good start after a relaxing summer. CLEAR is just beginning the second year of our four-year funding cycle, and we look forward to sharing our progress on CLEAR's various initiatives with you in future newsletters and via our website.

The main article in this issue of *CLEAR News*, by co-authors Bill VanPatten and Walter Hopkins, covers the use of Can-Do statements in language programs. Drawing from their experience in developing a partial-hybrid flipped Spanish curriculum and introducing Can-Do statements as part of the assessment process, they give concrete advice on how such a system might work at other institutions.

We enjoyed welcoming participants from all over the country (and abroad) to MSU for our professional development workshops this summer. Our offerings for summer 2016 will be online by mid-October. We'll be trying something a little different with the scheduling this year, so watch for announcements!

In this issue we also highlight just a few of the outreach programs in which CLEAR is involved. We take part in a number of initiatives each year that introduce world languages and cultures to the wider community, and they're always great fun.

Look for us in November at ACTFL in San Diego - we always enjoy going to regional and national conferences to share about CLEAR's free and low-cost products for world language teachers. And as always, you can visit our website for the latest information about CLEAR and our projects: <http://clear.msu.edu>.



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SUGGESTIONS WANTED!

We strive to publish *CLEAR News* articles that represent current topics in foreign language teaching, and we want to hear from you! If you have an idea for an article or would like to see a particular subject addressed, please let us know at clear@msu.edu. We will consider your idea for future issues of the newsletter.

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The US Department of Education awards grants through Title VI funding to a small number of institutions for the purpose of establishing, strengthening, and operating language resource and training centers to improve the teaching and learning of foreign languages. There are currently sixteen Language Resource Centers nationwide: the Assessment and Evaluation Language Resource Center (AELRC), a consortium of Georgetown University and the Center for Applied Linguistics; the Center for Advanced Language Proficiency Education and Research (CALPER) at The Pennsylvania State University; the Center for Advanced Research on Language Acquisition (CARLA) at the University of Minnesota; the Center for Applied Second Language Studies (CASLS) at the University of Oregon; the Center for Languages of the Central Asian Region (CeLCAR) at Indiana University; the Center for Educational Resources in Culture, Language and Literacy (CERCLL) at the University of Arizona; the Center for Integrated

Language Communities (CILC) at City University of New York; the Center for Language Education and Research (CLEAR) at Michigan State University; the Center for Open Educational Resources and Language Learning (COERLL) at the University of Texas at Austin; the Center for Urban Language Teaching and Research (CULTR) at Georgia State University; the National African Language Resource Center (NALRC) at Indiana University; the National East Asian Languages Resource Center (NEALRC) at The Ohio State University; the National Foreign Language Resource Center (NFLRC) at the University of Hawai'i at Manoa; the National Heritage Language Resource Center (NHLRC), a consortium of UCLA and the UC Consortium for Language Learning and Teaching; the National Resource Center for Asian Languages (NRCAL) at California State University, Fullerton; and the Slavic and Eurasian Language Research Center (SEELRC) at Duke University.

Language programs, then, are confronted with this tension between 1) what we know about language acquisition and how communicative ability develops, and 2) the need to assign grades. Although we focus on a college-level program, a similar tension exists in many secondary contexts. In the next section, we will describe how we addressed this tension in the Spanish language program at MSU.

What Have We Done at MSU in Spanish?

To begin this section, we contextualize the use of Can-Do statements with a brief description of our basic language program. First, we have developed a partial-hybrid flipped Spanish curriculum: students receive four credit hours for basic Spanish classes but only attend three days per week. The three days per week that students meet with instructors are devoted to lots of input and interactive communicative tasks appropriate for the students' level. To compensate for the fourth credit hour, we have developed online materials in which students self-teach the basics of vocabulary and grammar (based on the textbook *Sol y viento*; see references). Before each class period, students must complete a set of activities that can take them up to thirty minutes to complete. Because classes meet on Monday, Wednesday and Friday, this means that students have pre-class obligatory preparatory work due at 11:00 p.m. each Sunday, Tuesday, and Thursday. This pre-class work is worth 25% of their final grade, providing great incentive to do the work prior to coming to class. The result is a much better interactive class hour without time spent on explicit teaching and practice. (For those interested in reading more about flipping a classroom, see the article by Spino and Trego in a recent *CLEAR News* listed in our references.)

The rationale behind this structure is that we have a stated proficiency outcome for the basic Spanish program: *at least 50% of the students exiting the fourth semester course will be at Intermediate-Mid proficiency on the ACTFL scale*. As any language professional knows, this is an ambitious goal for a university setting. The only way to achieve it is to rethink the curriculum and make changes. What we have designed at MSU is one way to move class time toward a fully communicative and proficiency orientation.

Up until spring 2014, we had included lesson-end quizzes or tests that amounted to 50% of the final grade. These were

given in class and depending on which semester, would total either four or five class periods devoted to formal assessment. We realized that such testing did not necessarily match our stated proficiency goals. Why devote 50% of the final grade to testing that did not align with our proficiency outcome? What was missing was a built-in proficiency assessment of students during each course. We thus began to consider the use of Can-Do statements as a possible metric, but at the same time—given we are a university setting—there had to be some established way of assigning a numerical grade at the end of the semester. The solution we hit upon was to move testing to an online environment and to use the class days previously devoted to testing for Can-Do statements. First, a note about the Can-Do statements.

As mentioned earlier, the ACTFL-published Can-Do benchmark statements are reflective of general proficiency guidelines and levels. The Can-Do statement we quoted at the outset is fine for an exit metric, for example, but what about assessment during, say, Spanish 101 (the first semester)? ACTFL provides more specific Can-Do statements intended to be used within and across courses. For example, one such statement for Intermediate-Mid is the following:

I can talk about my daily activities and personal preferences.

☐ I can talk about my daily routine.

☐ I can talk about my interests and hobbies.

. . . and others.

When examining these Can-Do statements, we decided they were not specific enough as evaluation metrics for our courses. For example, what does it mean for a student to say “I can talk about my daily routine?” Talk about it in what way? What is a daily routine? What information do we expect students to provide? Other similar questions surfaced as we pondered their implementation. We thus decided to examine our curriculum for those tasks that matched the spirit of Intermediate-Mid ability and then developed a series of Can-Do statements that deconstruct the broader statement(s) into doable classroom assessment tasks. As examples, here are some of the Can-Do statements for Spanish 101, and in the interest of space we are including our versions related to daily routines and activities.

- I can answer basic questions about my daily schedule including classes, work, and study time.
- I can ask someone basic questions about his or her daily schedule related to classes, work, and study time.
- I can say when I get up, when I go to bed, three things I do every day, and if any of these things are different on the weekends.
- I can ask someone else about when that person gets up, goes to bed, and what his or her daily and weekend activities are.

As can be seen, these Can-Do statements include topics and abilities that form part of the larger picture of what it means to be an Intermediate-Mid speaker. That is, these curriculum-specific Can-Do statements form part of the larger benchmark restated here: “I can participate in conversations on familiar topics using sentences and series of sentences. I can handle short social interactions in everyday situations by asking and answering a variety of questions. I can usually say what I want to say about myself and my everyday life.”

Students use a self-assessment scale prior to engaging in a Can-Do task, exemplified below:

Read the following Can-Do statement and rate yourself on your ability to perform it. Think carefully!

I can say when I get up, when I go to bed, three things I do every day, and if any of these things are different on the weekends.

- ☐ I can perform this function with ease.
- ☐ I can perform this function, but not easily.
- ☐ I am not sure I can perform this function.

We have worked with instructors to develop templates for how to use these statements in class, that is, how to work up to the statement so that students then perform it and are evaluated. Instructors thus have some latitude in the implementation of the Can-Do statements. For example, in

one such template the instructor begins the class hour displaying the Can-Do statement and reviewing it with students, asking how many think they can do it with ease. Then students are paired and are asked to simply “do the statement.” The instructor circulates to listen in and answer questions. Once the students are finished, the instructor calls the class to together, asks the students how they did, and answers any general questions. Then the instructor says “OK. That was your warm up. Now you are going to do the Can-Do statement for a grade.” Students then take out cell phones, iPads or any other devices on which they can record themselves. They record their name and class, then perform the activity. When finished, they send their instructor the recording. That night, the instructor reviews each student’s recording and assigns an evaluation using the following scale:

2: The student performed the activity with ease.

1: The student performed the activity, but had some difficulty here and there.

0: The student could not perform the activity or performed it poorly. The student was absent or did not do the activity.

To be sure, we work with instructors periodically to review these metrics and to listen to student samples to ensure the nature of a 2, a 1, and a 0. For the final grade, each Can-Do statement is worth 4% for a total of 20% of the final grade.

Regarding the old paper-and-pencil tests, we converted these to an online format. Students take these self-assessments at the end of each lesson/unit at the same point during the course they would have taken them if the tests were in-class. In addition, we reduced the value of these tests to 25% of the final grade. We’ve conducted research comparing the mean scores on in-class tests and online tests and have found no differences in scores (see VanPatten, Hopkins, & Trego, in press). Thus, we have found that for our program and our students, moving tests to an online format has sacrificed nothing in terms of more formal testing. Instead, freeing up class testing time has allowed us to implement our own curriculum-specific Can-Do statements, resulting in a program in which evaluation of students is more closely aligned with our goals and our teaching methodology.

Concluding Remarks

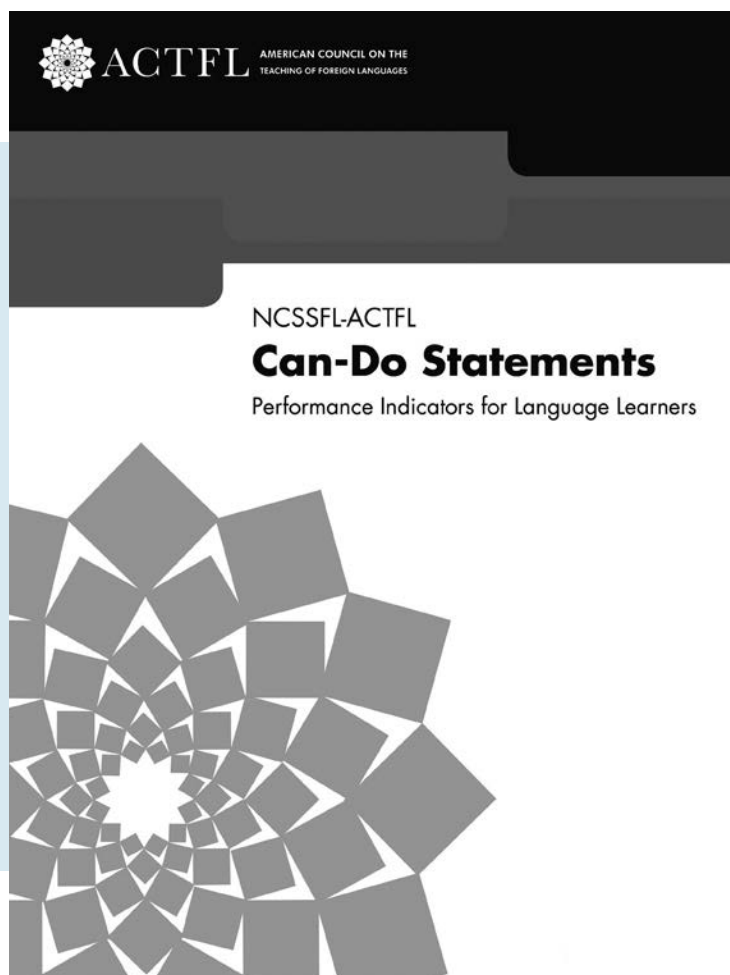
What we have just described is particular to our teaching and learning context but we hope the description provides ideas for readers to consider the use of Can-Do statements at their own institutions. We have focused here on using Can-Do statements for “formal” evaluation; the creation of final numerical grades. But there are other uses of Can-Do statements (e.g., placement, program evaluation, student self-assessment for portfolios such as IPAs—Individual Portfolio Assessments). Based on our experience with Can-Do statements, we encourage all language-teaching professionals to experiment with them and see what works. They are working well for us and they have become an integral part of matching goals, teaching, and student evaluation.

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Summer Workshops a Success

For the nineteenth consecutive year, CLEAR hosted workshops this summer, drawing participants from all over the United States and three other countries. World language educators from many levels and backgrounds gathered at Michigan State University to gain hands-on experience in a variety of topics.

The first workshop, **“I look forward to developing these ideas further and applying them in future courses I will take and teach.”**
(2015 workshop participant)

led by guest presenter Julie Foss of Saginaw Valley State University, was a great success. Participants were happy with the wealth of examples and resources, and enjoyed collaborating with their peers. One teacher reported that she will now be able to “[Design] activities based on global and local strategies.” Another said she plans to “use the reading/listening activities right away and often.”

Technology took center stage at the second workshop, in which participants learned about CLEAR’s Rich Internet Applications and other ways to effectively introduce technology in the language classroom. Teachers appreciated the hands-on

activities in a brand-new Mac lab, the time devoted to personal consultation with workshop leader Angelika Kraemer, and, it must be said, the snacks. Participants had plans to put the RIAs to use right away: “I’m going to have students use the [QuizBreak] site to create questions for class and review activities” and another reported that she will “use RIA techniques in [her] Chinese class.”

The third workshop, “The Basics of Assessment: Applying Proficiency-Based Approaches to the Classroom,” was led by guest presenter Meg Malone of the Center for Applied Linguistics. Participants said it was “very obvious Meg knows her subject well” and that she “definitely helped me to better understand the content.” Both novice and experienced teachers left the workshop with new information. One educator commented that the best thing about the workshop was the information on “both constructing and evaluating assessments to proficiency levels. It was definitely true that

“I won this workshop at [a state-level conference], and I am SO GLAD for the opportunity! I will be back!”
(2015 workshop participant)

although I felt I had enough background in that area, it was very helpful to go into much more detail and connect it with all aspects of assessment.”



Spotlight on Outreach

CLEAR undertakes a number of outreach activities each year, whether local, regional, or national. Here are just a few of the initiatives CLEAR has sponsored or otherwise participated in recently.

- **CONFERENCES:** CLEAR exhibits at several conferences each year. From the state-level conference of the Michigan World Language Association to the national gathering of the American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages, CLEAR personnel look forward to meeting our constituents face-to-face and sharing about our latest projects.
- **WORLD LANGUAGES DAY:** After a three-year hiatus, this major outreach event returned in spring 2015. Spearheaded by CLEAR and sponsored by approximately twenty departments and other campus units, World Languages Day brings hundreds of high school students from around Michigan to campus for a one-day conference. This year attendees chose from over 75 sessions in more than twenty languages, plus culture-specific sessions and general topics such as career paths for language majors, linguistics, and the use of games in language classes.

- **ELEMENTARY OUTREACH:** CLEAR is active in the Greater Lansing area, and is involved with outreach at a number of local schools. One program in partnership with the CeLTA Language School brought Italian, Hausa, and German after-school instruction to K-5 students. An international festival offered over 100 K-5 students and their families a chance to explore languages, cultures, and other diversity at some twenty “passport stations.” Another outreach program took world languages on the road and brought international students and scholars from Michigan State University to a number of elementary and middle schools in and beyond the Lansing area.

Just a few session titles from World Languages Day 2015

- ◇ **Saigon: Pearl of the Far East**
- ◇ **You're-a what? A crash course in Yoruba culture**
- ◇ **Can you speak Italian while sitting on your hands?**
- ◇ **Grumbeere und Zicken: Fun with German dialects**
- ◇ **Chicken-legged houses and burning effigies: Folk tales, music, and holidays in Russia**
- ◇ **Namaste America!**
- ◇ **You know more Swahili than you think!**
- ◇ **Quoi de neuf, France?**
- ◇ **Capoeira: An Afro-Brazilian martial art**
- ◇ **Speed Friend: Personality matching through the Chinese zodiac**





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CLEAR News is a publication of the Center for Language Education and Research and is intended to inform foreign language educators of the Center's ongoing research projects and professional development workshops, to report on current foreign language research and publications and their applicability to the classroom, and to provide a forum for educators to discuss foreign language teaching and learning topics.

