

**ACTFL**

**AMERICAN COUNCIL ON THE  
TEACHING OF FOREIGN LANGUAGES**

**Review and Analysis  
of Interpretive Reading Tasks and Assessments  
for Mandarin Institute – Loyola Marymount University  
STARTALK Word Frequency Dictionary Project**

**February 27, 2017**

# Report to Mandarin Institute-Loyola Marymount University

## Objectives of the Report

1. Examine the Mandarin Institute-Loyola Marymount University (MI-LMU) assessment tasks for each of grades K-5 and analyze how the tasks at each grade level are aligned with the ACTFL Proficiency Guidelines (targeting the Novice and Intermediate ranges).
2. Examine the MI-LMU assessment tasks for each of grades K-5 and analyze how the tasks at each grade level parallel the design of the AAPPL tasks for Novice and Intermediate ranges.
3. Use the Word Frequency Dictionary pilot program student results from the AAPPL assessment as part of the analysis, examining the AAPPL Interpretive Reading scores and the responses on the MI-LMU assessment by grade level of the students, to provide an indication of how well the MI-LMU assessment also indicates the proficiency range of the learners.

### **1. Examine the Mandarin Institute-Loyola Marymount University (MI-LMU) assessment tasks for each of grades K-5 and analyze how the tasks at each grade level are aligned with the ACTFL Proficiency Guidelines (targeting the Novice and Intermediate ranges).**

This section will describe the format of the various tests, and how they are aligned with the ACTFL Proficiency Guidelines targeting Novice and Intermediate ranges.

#### General Format

Each of the six tests (K-5) discussed here is divided into three parts, with each part focusing on the testing of CHARACTERS, WORDS (two-character combinations that combine to form a word), and READING COMPREHENSION (sentence (K only)/paragraph-level reading).

The testing of CHARACTERS used a variety of formats, to include:

1. Read aloud a character that is shown to you;
2. Circle the character out of multiple choices that is read to you;
3. Match a character with a picture that corresponds to the character's meaning;
4. Circle one character out of multiple choices that best corresponds to a picture;
5. Circle one picture out of multiple choices that best corresponds to a given character's meaning;
6. Given a syllable written in pinyin, circle the character whose sound it represents.
7. Combine radicals with other components to form meaningful characters.

The testing of WORDS (two-character combinations) used a variety of formats, to include:

1. Matching a word with a picture that corresponds to the word's meaning;
2. Given one character that partially forms a two-character word depicted in a picture, select a second character from multiple choices that correctly completes the word or doing this same task without a picture.

3. Given characters denoting a category of objects/activities, circle a picture from multiple choices of an object/activity that fits the category;
4. Given a word and picture denoting a category of objects/activities, circle the word from multiple choices of the object/activity that fits the category;
5. Circle one picture out of multiple choices that best corresponds to a word's meaning.
6. Circle one word out of multiple choices that best corresponds to a picture;
7. Given four words, circle the one that is properly written or is improperly written.

The testing of READING COMPREHENSION has the students read sentences (K only) or paragraphs, and then asks them to:

1. Circle from multiple choices the picture that conveys the meaning of the sentence;
2. Circle the best answer to a series of questions dealing with the content of the paragraph.
3. Fill in the numbered blanks in a paragraph with the appropriate word given from multiple choices (cloze deletion)

## **Kindergarten**

Comment: A variety of skills and abilities tested in this section are at ACTFL **Novice Low with progress towards Novice Mid**, as the items test the students' ability to recognize high frequency single character/two-character words with cartoon picture support. Items also test the students' ability to pronounce familiar characters or match them to pictures. Additionally, the students are tested on their ability to choose the appropriate character that combines with another to form a word (referred to here as "character compounding"), or select the correct character from others that are visually similar to characters which would be incorrect in this particular situation. Choosing the correct category for words and pictures is also tested. Categories (colors, fruits, animals, family members) and specific activities (such as dancing or walking) are highly familiar to this age of student. Progress to Novice Mid is tested as students are required to read a short sentence (5 to 10 characters) and then select the picture that the sentence best describes. This is gauging Novice Mid performance (as identified in the NCSSFL-ACTFL Can-Do Statements) as students show if they "can recognize words, phrases, and characters when I associate them with things I already know."

## **First Grade**

Comment: As with the Kindergarten test, the First Grade test employs a variety of character and two-character word recognition tasks employing multiple choice pictures, or selecting characters that combine with another to form a two-character word, clearly testing **Novice Low**. As well, students are shown pictures and required to choose the attribute (number, color, habitat, etc.) in characters that best describes the picture. The test then goes to the reading comprehension section which is composed of three separate paragraphs (1. How Many are in your Family?; 2. Good Friends; 3. My Pets), each followed by 5 questions. The topics are highly constrained and within the experience of first-graders, and the fact that the paragraph-level texts are short in length yet highly descriptive makes the text repetitive and content predictable, with the questions designed to retrieve basic content information from the paragraphs. The lengths of the paragraphs make this **at least Novice Mid** and may be pushing the students beyond this level,

since the ability to process and hold in memory longer portions of text will present a challenge at this level.

## **Second Grade**

Comment: This set of tasks has students circling characters the teacher reads to them, with distractors to test both the students' command of tone and their ability to distinguish between characters that look alike. Students also pronounce characters that are displayed to them, indicating how well students are achieving sound-symbol correspondence in an orthography that presents challenges in this regard, since there are no letters to help students "sound out" unfamiliar words. As with the Kindergarten and 1<sup>st</sup> grade tests, there are character/word matching tasks with corresponding pictures that provide useful context, or pictures whereby the student chooses the character(s) that best describe it. Choosing a character that goes with another to form a proper word (character compounding) is also tested. A new format here consists of items whereby the students must select words that are correctly constructed and words that are incorrectly constructed (either visually or with characters conveying similar sounds which are incorrect when combined with another character), thus testing the students' ability to judge proper word formation; however, there is little context for this task, as there are no illustrations for support, but only the printed words. For the Reading Comprehension section, one paragraph (The Nest in the Tree) with 6 cloze deletions requires the students to supply the missing one or two character words given them in multiple choice format—it might be helpful to give the students sentence-level practice with the cloze format so that we could see their progression through the Novice Level band. Moreover, this is a challenging text given the minimal contextual support that is supplied with the text, plus the challenges presented through the use of the cloze format. Additionally, there are two paragraphs (The Tadpole Looks for his Mother and The Little Crow's House) (150-200 characters) with comprehension questions where the choices are given in either words, or longer explanations. These are more complex as they have little contextual support, are longer, are nature or folktale-based and are likely at the **Intermediate Level**, though the text is highly connected and requires the student to follow a definite storyline. At this level of their proficiency, the students will be challenged to derive meaning from a connected text of this length.

## **Third Grade**

Comment: This grade begins the students' introduction to pinyin, or the "helping language" whereby the sounds of Chinese characters are written using the Roman alphabet, with diacritics to represent the tones. These items test a range of abilities such as recognizing pinyin transliteration of characters, combining character semantic radicals with other components to form characters, and more matching of characters with pictures that convey their meanings. At the sentence level, there are items that require students to fill in the blanks in sentences with the appropriate words, with students also asked to select antonyms, synonyms, and words that change the meaning of the sentence. Although seemingly a less complicated task at the sentence level, the only support that is given is in the sentence itself, with no graphic support in the form of illustrations or pictures. **Novice High-Intermediate Low.**

A paragraph on the topic of kangaroos asks the students to supply nine cloze-style blanks within the paragraph. Two paragraphs follow, one (with no title) dealing with Frogs (followed by 5 questions) and another How a Dog Finds its Way, followed by 2 questions. The Kangaroo and Frog paragraphs are relatively short, though still of paragraph length, giving basic descriptions and attributes of these animals which are tested through the multiple-choice questions. The text is connected, with familiar content and a predictable story line. **Intermediate Low to Mid.**

#### **Fourth Grade**

Comment: These tests continue to test recognizing the pinyin transliterations of characters, again emphasizing acquisition of tone, syllable structure and pinyin spelling, and again more evaluation of character compounding, emphasizing recognizing which characters go together to form words and the multiple-choice matching of characters to pictures. At the sentence level, items test the students' ability to choose the synonym of an underlined word from multiple choices, plus the ability to fill in a blank in a sentence with the correct choice that fits the context. Items are also used whereby students select one word out of four that does not belong with the other three. The first reading comprehension passage (Wishes) is a morality tale about the importance of people for invention and moving life forward—the structure is predictable, repetitive, and employs a multiple choice format whereby the students answer basic content questions, The next text (Not Your Usual Fast Food Shop) is longer and displays a more complicated narrative style whereby a boy figures out why his grandfather supports this particular restaurant; Text 3 lists the major festivals of China, then focuses on the characteristics of the Spring Festival and the Lantern Festival. This is followed by information on the prices of rice dumpling soup. No illustrations or other pictorial support are provided, though the increased length and detail suggest this section tests the **Intermediate Mid** range.

#### **Fifth Grade**

Comment: Word and sentence level tasks test the students' command of pinyin, vocabulary, word compounding ability. Items are also used to test their ability to supply synonyms at the sentence level using the context supplied by other words in the sentence to choose the correct word. There are also items to test their ability to distinguish between different classes of words. For the reading comprehension paragraph "Dog is Man's Best Friend," the multiple-choice questions test the students' ability to not only pick out content-specific answers but also the students' ability to do some basic inferencing. Some items also require the students to use discourse/grammatical structures that are always used (and tested!) in Chinese prose; The "Fast Food" paragraph requires retrieving specific information plus overall comprehension ability (one question asks the students to supply a title); The last text deals with a famous Chinese folktale, with one inference question asking the student to choose an example of someone's behavior today that matches the behavior of the famer in ancient China. This is therefore challenging content and is rated at **Intermediate Mid**.

## **2. Examine the MI-LMU assessment tasks for each of grades K-5 and analyze how the tasks at each grade level parallel the design of the AAPPL tasks for Novice and Intermediate ranges.**

The MI-LMU and AAPPL assessment tasks differ in the following manner:

**Content:** According to the design of the ACTFL Assessment of Performance toward Proficiency in Languages (AAPPL), recommended texts for K-6 would include topics familiar to the learner, such as those dealing with one's school's floorplan, chores, and hobbies (Novice) and (Intermediate) newspaper headlines, goals for your PE class, and a letter from your teacher about the week's activities, and will involve a variety of tasks (make a poster, linking headlines with news story, etc.) and situations that are close to the students' experience (school election, restaurants, teaching visiting Chinese about our school, etc.). In other words, the content is highly focused and personalized to the student's more immediate environment. And while there was also immediate and personalized content in the MI-LMU assessments such as family and pets, the content had more of an academic flavor to it, such as describing animals in terms of their attributes and natural habitats, or through their presences in culturally-rich folktales. Still, this is familiar content for students in an immersion program, so is consistent with the content/context piece that is called for by the ACTFL Proficiency Guidelines.

**Format:** Being a computerized test underpinned by the World Readiness Standards for Learning Language and the ACTFL Proficiency Guidelines, AAPPL tests the Interpretive Reading mode by providing specific tasks for the students that are immediately related to their lives as students and young people. Because the ACTFL Reading Guidelines stress factors such as visual/extra-linguistic support and a student's background knowledge while reading, AAPPL Interpretive Reading questions often contain pictures that aid the test taker, while receiving both the test questions and some of the accompanying contextual support in English since the test is not evaluating how well the test-taker can read the directions. However, we see the use of English as something to be avoided in many immersion environments, which is possible when directions given in the target language use consistent words and phrasing. There are also different formats available, such as dragging-and-dropping answers in a computerized environment. The MI-LMU assessments follow a generally standardized testing format using matching, fill-in-the-blank, and multiple-choice formats. There is a heavy emphasis on the testing of word recognition and word formation, as well as developing the skills to recognize and use pinyin effectively—clearly, the evaluation of the students' "word power" is highly emphasized in these assessments. The character and word recognition tasks effectively use age-appropriate illustrations to enable learners to have visual support, though in evaluating students' ability to use synonyms and antonyms, or choose which word out of four was dissimilar to the other three, there was no other illustrative/pictorial support except for the words themselves. The same was true with sentence-level tasks where students primarily use the context of the sentence to aid them in appropriate word selection, or in the paragraph-level reading tasks that also lacked illustrations or other support. These reading comprehension texts tended to be fairly long, though fell within the Intermediate range due to their oftentimes predictable text structure and focused subject matter. Some of the tests were difficult to rate, not so much from the content,

but because the comprehension questions tended to test the student’s ability to retrieve details, and not aspects noted in the ACTFL Guidelines such as “main ideas” with “some supporting details.” This might result in the students performing more of a scanning strategy, whereby they look at the wording of the questions and then try to find the matching structure and vocabulary in the text to locate the answer. Clearly, skimming and scanning is important for students to learn and do, so including questions that encourage these strategies would be beneficial. However, it may not be evidence of the higher-level comprehension that the test may be trying to elicit from or develop within the student, as in the test questions that were included in some of the paragraphs that pushed the students to do more inferencing, and thinking “outside the text.”

**3. Use the Word Frequency Dictionary pilot program student results from the AAPPL assessment as part of the analysis, examining the AAPPL Interpretive Reading scores and the responses on the MI-LMU assessment by grade level of the students, to provide an indication of how well the MI-LMU assessment also indicates the proficiency range of the learners.**

Although raw data on the students’ performance on the MI-LMU assessments is available, a statistical analysis of these data for a variety of purposes is ongoing. Yet, a very cursory look at only the 15-item reading comprehension scores of the K-5 MI-LMU test scores indicate possible challenges and progress throughout the grades:

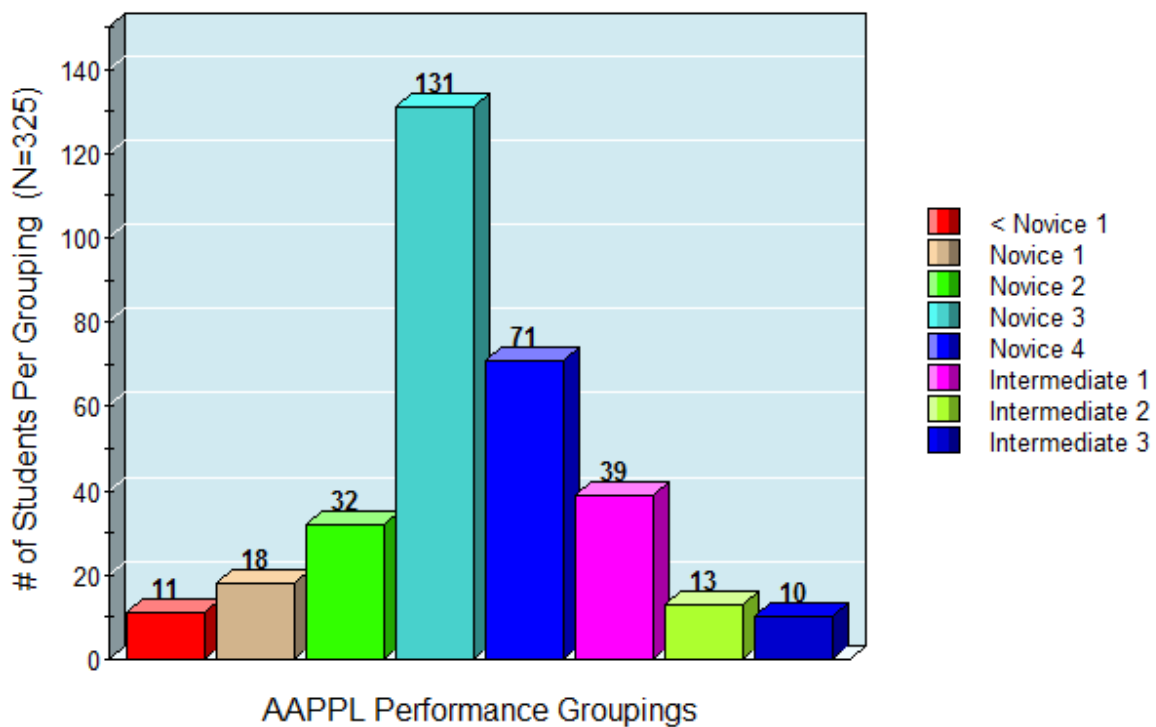
Grade	N	MEAN	SD
K	56	5.8	2.36
1	100	9.06	3.9
2	116	5.85	3.87
3	155	5.17	3.02
4	169	7.1	3.2
5	84	9.6	3.4

Given that more validation work is ongoing, it would be premature to present an interpretation of these results except to say that the processing of larger texts (such as paragraphs) that are

unsupported by extra-textual support may be a significant challenge for students at these grade levels, despite the encouraging progress observed in the later grades. As well, they have yet to develop a rich repertoire of top-down/bottom-up strategies that will help them make meaning with more fluency and increased comprehension, so these assessments are important in charting the students' progress towards this goal.

In addition, data from a sample of Grade 3-5 students who took the interpretive reading portion of the AAPPL indicates strong progress through the Novice performance bands of this assessment, and even into the Intermediate range. A graph depicting this sample illustrates this:

### Grades 3-5 AAPPL Interpretive Reading Scores



This demonstrates the strongest presence in the Novice 3 band, strong presence in the Novice 4 band, and an impressive number of students already at the Intermediate Level. While the content and topics in the AAPPL assessment are intended to be familiar to the students, the specific readings are not, nor is the vocabulary limited to a set number of memorized characters. The AAPPL assessment therefore measures students' ability to transfer the reading skills learned in a Mandarin program to a new setting – an accurate indicator of the students' level of Proficiency (independent of curriculum) compared to the familiarity and practice that is built into classroom assessment which therefore raises the students' level of performance (linked to the curriculum). Investigating how students at each particular grade level are progressing in terms of their Interpretive Reading ability will be an important next step to further break out individual grade-level progress.