



Assessing
Spanish
Proficiency

with
stories

Eric Herman

Assessing Spanish Proficiency with stories

Eric Herman

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Thirty 400 word stories
within the highest frequency
300 words
& comprehension quizzes

Theory to classroom practice
GUIDE to testing proficiency

Perfect for common assessments
& pre and post testing
of Novices & Intermediates
in communicative classrooms

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with stories

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Practical Tests of Proficiency

“At their very best, the tasks that appear on a test should resemble the kinds of tasks at which learners should be working in the classroom” (Savignon, 1997, p. 241)

If we can make proficiency testing a common, classroom practice, then perhaps the language teaching field can finally make the shift to a communicative approach. I am also excited, because I think these proficiency testing methods make action research more meaningful and feasible. Some of the task options stick to narrative text-types and the storytelling context, thus qualifying as superb, course-referenced proficiency tests (remember: ACTFL calls this “performance”) for those teachers with story-based curriculum. Storytelling is a common assessment used in SLA research. In other words, the tasks suit the teaching. But the stories can also be the starting point for different communicative tasks.

It is a strength that the tasks are comprehension-dependent. This would have a positive backwash effect on the classroom. Teachers will prepare students with comprehension-based activities, a research-based approach given the consensus about the importance of input (arguably the only causative variable in the acquisition of a native-type knowledge). This also means that the test is not time away from acquisition, but is itself an opportunity to acquire and develop communicative skills.

On the tasks requiring output, we want to minimize time spent planning. If we just gave students a topic to discuss, then some students will spend time thinking and others may rely on language they've rehearsed. If the story were in the first language, then students may get stuck trying to think of words that they do not know in the second language. Starting with the second language story gives everyone the same, unfamiliar story and the best chance to show off their fluency.

Why these Stories?

1. Graded: To bias for the best and increase the likelihood of communication (authenticity), the stories and quizzes are written within the 300 most frequently used words of Spanish (Davies, 2006), plus 400+ English-Spanish cognates, and 50 non-cognate words beyond the 300 word level. Those words with a lower frequency than 300 are either easily figured out from the context or else they are glossed at the first occurrence of the word in the speed reading course and again if it is key to understanding another passage. Sentences are short and grammar tenses have been restricted almost entirely to the present tense (although texts can be read aloud in the past tense).

2. Construct validity: By virtue of #1, there is a stronger argument that real-world language use is being measured. Sticking to the highest frequency language means that the language is the most useful and fundamental to communication in a broad range of contexts (frequency lists are determined by number of occurrences and range of contexts). This also means that communicative classrooms won't need to backwards plan lessons and syllabi to prepare students. There will be ample opportunities in a communicative classroom to acquire these words by the definition of high-frequency.

Assessing Spanish Proficiency with Stories

2. Unrehearsed content: The stories are not coming from class-created stories and are not intended to be practiced prior to testing.

3. Background knowledge = Stories are about characters who are likely to be known and relevant to the students (celebrities and cartoon characters) and thus easy to visualize, while also motivating students to read and comprehend. To decrease predictability and increase attention to meaning, some changes in familiar plots and character details have been made. Imagine: Texts on a test that are a fun and pleasurable experience!

4. Leveled: The readings get progressively more challenging. The number of different words in a story, sentence length, and structural variety all slightly increase. This enables a teacher to test with stories at different levels in order to give everyone a chance at improving. In my classroom, I repeated the same task with 2 different stories: 1 from the first half, 1 from the latter half of the book.

Task Characteristics:

- All tasks are meaning-based
- All depend upon comprehension of input
- Time-pressured (a condition that favors reliance on implicit knowledge)
- Quick to administer and easy to score
- Provide objective, quantitative data

If you refer back to the definition of communication and the principles of a communicative approach, then you will see that these tasks satisfy all of the criteria for communication and could just as well be used as daily tasks in a communicative classroom. Adopt and adapt the texts and tasks as needed. Use multiple tasks when possible, because the more varied the tasks, the better our position to make claims about general proficiency.

* Teacher Tip: Read the stories live, rather than tape-recorded. That is more real, will include non-verbal expression, and will increase engagement. In order to standardize the speech rate, decide your rate beforehand and figure out the total time. Then, just keep a watch nearby. The stories include dialogue, so the teacher ought to read that with different voices. In addition, the teacher can add to the story “Bob said. . .” in order to make it clearer who is talking.

Evaluation Criteria:

- Fluency (# of words)
- Comprehension/Comprehensibility (multiple choice, # of comprehensible sentences)
- Informational content (# of correct facts)

For practical reasons, proficiency is not being assessed according to the 4 components of communicative competence. It is assumed that fluency and comprehensibility are macro-traits, which subsume the 4 components. Each component will contribute to the relative fluency and comprehensibility of the communication.

These are the same criteria used in the Savignon tests. I recommend them, because they are easy and quick methods that provide objective, quantitative data. Using test paper with numbered blanks makes this even faster (see next section). To be even more sensitive to novice level progress, count clauses (look for the verbs) rather than sentences. Don't count any words in the first language and language that is consecutively repeated, e.g. "muy, ~~muy~~, ~~muy~~ grande."

Although subjective, it would be even easier to follow Savignon and rate one or all criteria from 1-6 based on general impression. Another option is to use a rubric to assign points to the degree by which the 3 criteria are satisfied. Sum or weight the points and determine ranges that correspond to a global rating. This may be necessary if you need to turn the ratings into a grade. Below is an example you can adapt for your classes.

Points	Fluency	Comprehensibility	Facts
1	0-19	1-3	1-3
2	20-39	4-5	4-5
3	40-59	6-7	6-7
4	60-79	8-9	8-9
5	80-99	10-11	10-11
6	100+	12+	12+

Points	Grade
16+	A
12-15	B
8-11	C
4-7	D
3	F

If you apply the ACTFL guidelines, just remember that the rating cannot be taken as comparable to a rating earned from an ACTFL test. In other words, no claims can be made about someone's ACTFL proficiency level.

Simplify everything and combine all 3 criteria to count the **amount of communication**, defined as the number of comprehensible words, clauses, or sentences that are also factually correct. Even more practical, give an impressionistic rating that uses that combined criteria, but rather than counting instances, review the language sample and assign a global 1-6 rating. On the speed rewrite task, this is basically an evaluation of how well the student summarized the story.

Norm-Referenced Evaluation:

For placement purposes, to compare programs, and/or to measure pre and post-test results, there is an easy, norm-referenced method for evaluating overall ability. Review all language samples together and categorize based on the degree of communicative ability relative to other language samples. I first heard of this procedure when reading how SLA researchers Beniko Mason and Stephen Krashen evaluated writing samples. They summarize the procedure:

"The two summaries were evaluated holistically by two native speakers of English on a 1-6 scale, where 1 = worst and 6 = best writing. Specifically, raters were first asked to categorize papers as 'good', 'bad', or 'average'. Then papers in each pile were re-evaluated and divided into two groups to form six categories. As in Experiment 2, judges did not know whether the papers had been written at the beginning or end of the academic year" (1997, p. 97).

11. Shrek

novia - girlfriend

Hay un chico muy grande. Es un ogro llamado Shrek. Vive en Far Far Away. Shrek tiene un amigo que se llama Donkey. Los dos tienen novias. Un día Shrek decide que es una buena idea comprar algo para su novia Fiona. Fiona es una ogra también. Shrek va a la casa de Donkey y le dice:

- Hola amigo. Tenemos muchos años de estar con nuestras novias y nunca les compramos cosas. Creo que es una buena idea ir a buscar algo para ellas.

- Buena idea, amigo. Necesito dar una cosa fantástica a mi novia, Dragón. Pero, ¿Qué podemos comprar?

- No sé. Vamos a la casa de Gingy. Él siempre sabe qué hacer.

Entonces, Shrek y Donkey van a la casa de Gingy. Cuando llegan, entran a la casa, y miran a Gingy. Le dice Shrek:

- Queremos su opinión. Queremos comprar algo especial para nuestras novias. ¿Tienes alguna idea para nosotros?

- Primero, necesito saber una cosa. ¿Qué les gusta a sus novias?

Donkey le responde:

- A Dragón le gusta el perfume.

Shrek y Donkey deciden buscar perfume para sus novias. Ninguno sabe sobre los tipos diferentes de perfumes. Entonces, Gingy busca en el Internet para perfumes en Far Far Away. Resulta que Pinocho tiene una tienda y una colección grande de perfumes. Los amigos están contentos porque saben donde vive Pinocho. Entonces, van a la tienda de Pinocho. Llegan en cinco minutos. Shrek le dice a Pinocho:

- Mucho gusto. Soy Shrek y este es mi amigo, Donkey. Buscamos perfumes para nuestras novias.

- Mucho gusto. Me llamo Pinocho. El tipo de perfume depende de la novia.

- Mi novia es una ogra.

- Y mi novia es una dragona.

- Lo siento chicos. Tengo perfumes para gorilas, dinosaurios, hasta tengo para unicornios, pero no tengo ningún perfume para ogros ni dragones.

Los amigos salen de la tienda muy tristes. Pinocho les dice a ellos:

- No estén tristes. Tienen novias muy bonitas.

Después de hablar, Pinocho tenía una cabeza más grande.

A Shrek y a Donkey les importa comprar el perfume ideal para sus novias. Ahora saben que no es tan simple encontrar cosas para chicas.

- Podemos ir a hablar con Cinderella. Ella es amiga de nuestras novias. Ella puede darnos una idea de dónde podemos encontrar los perfumes.

Entonces, van al palacio de Cinderella. Ella tiene perfume de ogros y dragones y se los da. Los llevan a sus novias y todos están contentos.

11 Shrek Quiz

1. Shrek quiere
 - a. comprar algo.
 - b. vivir en otra parte.
 - c. una novia.
 - d. un amigo.
2. Shrek y Donkey no
 - a. saben qué pueden comprar.
 - b. son buenos amigos.
 - c. quieren buscar cosas.
 - d. tienen novias.
3. Van a la casa de Gingy porque Gingy
 - a. es muy inteligente.
 - b. tiene perfumes.
 - c. tiene cosas especiales.
 - d. siempre tiene buenas ideas.
4. A Shrek y Donkey, Gingy
 - a. les da una cosa fantástica.
 - b. les hace una pregunta.
 - c. parece saber mucho sobre perfumes.
 - d. parece ser amigo de Pinocho.
5. Buscan perfume porque
 - a. a todas las chicas les gusta.
 - b. a Fiona le gusta.
 - c. a la novia de Donkey le gusta.
 - d. Gingy lo recomienda.
6. Saben que Pinocho tiene perfumes porque
 - a. es un amigo.
 - b. todos lo saben.
 - c. lo buscan en el Internet.
 - d. vive con Gingy.
7. Pinocho les da a Shrek y Donkey
 - a. perfume de gorilas y dinosaurios.
 - b. ningún perfume.
 - c. una idea.
 - d. novias bonitas.
8. Pinocho tiene una cabeza grande porque
 - a. está triste por Shrek y Donkey.
 - b. cree que tiene el perfume perfecto, pero no lo tiene.
 - c. no sabe dónde vive Cinderella.
 - d. no cree que las novias de Shrek y Donkey son bonitas.
9. Al final, Shrek cree que encontrar algo para una chica
 - a. es simple.
 - b. no es simple.
 - c. es estúpido.
 - d. es una mala idea.
10. Cinderella
 - a. vive con las novias.
 - b. sabe donde hay perfumes.
 - c. les da perfumes a Shrek y Donkey.
 - d. lleva el perfume a las novias.