

Directed Practice:

A Resource for Self-Directed English Language Learners

Research shows that regular, directed, and deliberate practice is the key to building, refining, and improving language proficiency (e.g. moving up a level on the ACTFL OPI proficiency scale). *Structured practice* and *frequency of practice* are the two essential factors that will lead to your success.

What is Directed Practice?

Directed Practice involves using focused periods of language use with a partner, or with a recording, in which the speaker attempts to accomplish tasks associated with a higher level of language while controlling for the criteria associated with that level.

Effective use of Directed Practice:

- is purposeful, reflective, and methodical
- begins with identifying needs, developing learning goals, and implementing appropriate strategies
- is conducted with the intention of improving performance
- recognizes that progress is achieved through time and effort

What are my Directed Practice goals?

Keep these goals in mind while engaging in Directed Practice:

- Use several paragraphs with appropriate transition words
- Switch tenses and be sure to use the past tense
- Make sure an unsympathetic listener can understand you

Examples of advanced low topics for practice

The examples below incorporate the tasks associated with Advanced Low language level. Use these as a springboard to come up with a variety of topics to practice impromptu speech.

1. Tell someone outside of your field about a recent research paper you have read. Tell the story of the paper. Explain the author's research with easy to understand details and examples. Briefly explain concepts unfamiliar to your listener. Give examples from everyday life to contextualize abstract ideas.

2. Introduce and compare two methodologies, frameworks, or seminal papers from your field to someone outside of your field.
Remember to briefly explain concepts unfamiliar to your listener and give examples from everyday life to contextualize abstract ideas. After explaining these concepts or papers, compare and contrast them.
 3. Tell the story of how you decided to join Cornell or your research team.
 4. Compare and contrast two programs or research areas that interested you before you decided on Cornell or that you have considered as a Cornell graduate student.
 5. Talk about a challenge you have faced (either personal or professional) and how you were able to overcome it.
 6. Compare and contrast the benefits and challenges of being a graduate student.
 7. Compare and contrast a city you have visited recently with another place where you have lived.
 8. Talk about a current or past hobby.
 9. Talk about one memory from one day, or a series of events in the past. This could be an event you participated in, a time you got together with others, or just one memory that stands out for you.
 10. Talk about one experience you had at an internship, club you joined, or job.
Focus on your memory from one day, or a series of events in the past. This could be the first day, last day, or one memory that stands out for you.
 11. Talk about one experience from a recent trip or conference.
Talk about one memory from one day, or a series of events in the past. This could be the outgoing or return trip, a day you went to or gave a presentation, or one memory that stands out for you.
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What is Advanced Low proficiency?

Speakers who have achieved Advanced Low proficiency are able to communicate on a variety of topics about themselves, their experiences, interests, and background, outside of their discipline.

In particular, they can:

- be understood by an unsympathetic listener (a listener who is unaccustomed to hearing non-native speakers of English)
- handle unexpected conversation challenges
- rephrase and/or circumlocute
- explain, narrate, and compare
- use major verb tenses accurately
- produce paragraphs with details, connectors, and relevant vocabulary

What should I focus on to achieve Advanced Low level speech?

Recording your practice allows you the opportunity to reflect and assess your language proficiency. The criteria below can be used as a rubric for reviewing your Directed Practice.

These criteria are the 'Three C's: Clear, Connected and Complex' speech:

Clear

Grammatical Accuracy

- Control of major verb tenses (simple present, past, future)
- Grammatical structure cannot interfere with listener comprehension

Pronunciation & Intonation

- Clear and accurate word and phrasal stress to emphasize important words
- Clear intonation
- Clear phonemes (consonant and vowel sounds, consonant clusters, final sounds)
- Use of thought groups with pausing to divide sentences according to the meaning you would like to convey

Connected / Complex

Paragraph-level Speech

- Sentences should be rich in details and description (details mean painting a picture with your words, rather than recalling a specific date or name)
- Use a variety of transition markers/devices to show connections between ideas and add complexity to the sentence structure

Complex

Vocabulary

- conveys accurate meaning
- demonstrates a broad range of vocabulary

How do I integrate Directed Practice into my conversations?

1. Record yourself as you practice using the Advanced Level criteria. This provides you with the opportunity to check your progress and assess whether you have met your practice goals.
2. Share the criteria for Advanced Low speech proficiency and solicit feedback from co-workers, lab partners, peers and others. Encourage them to correct you in the course of your usual conversations.

3. Practice your Advanced Low level language skills with a partner. If you are part of the ITA Program, you have the option to meet weekly with an Undergraduate Consultant for additional conversation practice at the Advanced Low level.
4. Keep your directed practice frequent and consistent. Fifteen-minute increments of directed practice are much more effective than an hour of unfocused practice.
5. Be creative in making time for directed practice (e.g. walking outside, waiting at the bus stop, riding the bus, or even while doing household chores!)
6. Create a list of topics that interest you (e.g. research in your field, current news, or hobbies) and pick one at random to practice your impromptu speech while maintaining the Advanced Low level. Remember that an Advanced Low speaker must be able to talk in detail about themselves, as well as their interests and experiences. Expand your horizons beyond topics within your academic discipline.
7. If you don't have the vocabulary to talk about a specific topic of interest, research the topic and find the appropriate words to use. Practice them in a sentence to become more familiar with using and pronouncing them. Build up from the sentence level to using them in paragraphs.

Additional Information

This resource explains the steps involved in directed language practice with a view to improving English language proficiency to achieve Advanced Low on the ACTFL OPI scale (read more about the [ACTFL OPI criteria for Advanced Low proficiency](#)). We have designed it to be used for ongoing practice, either by individuals, or in pairs, or when part of a small study group.

We strongly recommend consulting with a qualified English language instructor to help structure your use of the strategies above. Cornell graduate teaching assistants who are not ALS 5780 participants are welcome to [email the International Teaching Assistant Program](#) (ITAP) to request a consultation on self-directed strategies for enhancing their language proficiency.