

Tips and Advice for the Spanish OPI

I took the OPIc (computer version) in May 2011, but I never took the phone OPI. If my advice is only applicable to the OPIc, I'll make sure to note that at the beginning. These tips and tricks and advice aren't in any particular order. I just wrote them down as they came to me.

1. If you need an Advanced Low for the OPI, the two biggest things that you will be evaluated on are your ability to use the preterite and imperfect tenses correctly and the ability to maintain the tense you're speaking in. Making errors in the preterite/imperfect is what separates Advanced Lows from Intermediate Highs. Reverting to an easier tense (often the present) is common for speakers when they get nervous or flustered while in the middle of answering a question. This will separate the Ad Lows from the Int Highs as well.
2. Descriptions are key. They don't have to be lengthy, they just have to be grammatically correct. Make sure that you can consistently match your adjectives to your nouns (in number and gender) and that you maintain the verb tense. You may have a question asking you to describe something in the present, and then another question asking you to describe the same thing in the past. Practice describing objects or events with words that would make the listener picture the object or event clearly in their head.
3. Evaluators aren't going to mark you down for individual errors, like saying "las chicas buenos." But, if you continue to get your agreement wrong (combining masculine nouns with feminine adjectives, etc.), it becomes a pattern of errors and they WILL mark you down.
4. If you do make the occasional error, DON'T DWELL ON IT! Forget about it and move on. I know this is easier said than done (I could still tell you the individual errors I made on my OPI), but you have to do it. Otherwise, you'll lose your focus and possibly commit more errors. It's okay to correct yourself if you misspeak, but do it RIGHT AWAY ("vi a dos chicas buenos - em, buenas"). Going back to correct errors is going to reflect badly on your score and you'll end up getting lost in wherever you were in your answer. Remember, you won't get knocked down for stand-alone errors. Even native speakers trip up and misspeak from time to time.
5. For the OPIc (the computer version), you will be asked to select a few items that you are interested in (such as sports, activities, hobbies, etc) and they will generate your questions based on what you chose. That being said, choose things that you know how to talk about. You may know everything there is to know about a certain sport, but can you talk about it in Spanish? It might be better to choose things that you know a lot of vocabulary for instead of interests. I chose traveling because I knew how to talk about it, not because I was interested in it. Keep this in mind when it comes to that section of the test.
6. OPIc: You might get questions that have nothing to do with the items you chose (computer programs aren't perfect). This happened to me, but you just gotta roll with it. Don't panic, just breathe. Even if you don't know anything about the topic, there are still things that you CAN say

so that you don't end up just sitting silent for the whole question. There is a certain amount of wiggle room when it comes to the questions. For example, if you were asked how to perform a certain function on a cell phone (true question from my friend's OPI), you can straight-out say that you are technologically illiterate and haven't the faintest clue of how to use your phone. But don't stop there. Go on to say that you would consult a friend who's good with technology and describe the questions you would ask him about the function. Just make sure that you don't get too far away from the question and that you stay within the time limit. Remember, they're looking for grammatical accuracy, not necessarily truth.

----> A lot of #5 and #6 is applicable to the phone OPI as well, but your interviewer can't ask you about things you don't bring up in the conversation. So when they ask you what you're interested in, remember to say something that you can talk about, even if it's not something you enjoy.

7. OPIc: Speaking of time limits...make sure that you stay within them. Finishing a question before the time runs out is ALWAYS better than having the time run out on you. Practice completing sample questions in a timely fashion. If you're asked for a narration, make sure you fit in a beginning, a middle, and an end to your story before the time runs out. This just improves their perception of your ability to use the past tenses and maintain the verb tense. Babbling on and on to fill the empty space should be avoided at all costs.
8. If you don't know a certain word, circumlocute. Talk around it. Describe it. Try your very best to NOT say the word in English. That will get you marked down.
9. You are being evaluated on your ability to speak Spanish, not on your ability to tell the truth. So if you're faced with a question to which you don't have a true answer (like a trip you took in an airplane or something), MAKE SOMETHING UP! That said, it IS more difficult to make things up in another language, but it's better than sitting silent and wracking your brain for memories. You may just have to start an answer and see where it takes you.
10. Always speak clearly and with a good pace. Nervous speakers will tend to speed up, but if you have the space left over in your brain, continually tell yourself to slow down. People always speak faster than they think they do. If the evaluator can't understand you because you're talking so fast, your whole answer goes out the window.
11. Another popular question type is the situation with a complication. One question would ask you what to do in a certain situation and then after you answer, the next question will say that that solution didn't work and it will ask for another one. This tests your ability to think on your feet. Your answer doesn't have to be creative or witty, it just has to apply to the question and be grammatically correct. For example, let's say that you finished your meal in a restaurant and when you went to pay, your credit card was denied and you don't have any cash. You offer to wash dishes to make up the debt, but the manager doesn't accept your offer. Now you have to think of a new one. To practice, come up with a bunch of scenarios and have your partner introduce a complication so that you can practice thinking quickly.

12. Most people that receive Intermediate High know how to use the preterite and imperfect correctly but they didn't provide sufficient examples of their knowledge. Time markers are key in these types of questions. Commit to memory a list of time words that belong specifically to one tense or the other. Like "ayer" would go with preterite, whereas "cada dia" would go with imperfect. Another good idea is to fit in one or two instances of sentences that have both tenses (just make sure you use them correctly). The most common is where you have one action interrupting another action (preterite interrupts imperfect). Try to use as many distinct examples of preterite and imperfect as you can, even if you have to make stuff up.
13. Try to use as many verb tenses as possible where appropriate. Preterite/imperfect is hammered pretty hard, but it's not a bad idea to use present, future, conditional, present perfect, and past perfect if you can make it natural. Just make sure that you know where each tense falls on the timeline (past perfect before preterite, present perfect before present, etc.)
14. Practice telling stories (even if it's only to yourself, still do it out loud) that have a clear beginning, middle and end.
15. In the weeks leading up to the OPI, watch TV and movies in Spanish. More and more DVDs are equipped with Spanish dubbing these days, so switch it to Spanish and don't put any subtitles on. If you have access to Spanish-speaking television channels, watch an hour or two of news programs or shows that have lots of dialogue and conversation. It'll help more than you think.

I hope this list of tips has been helpful to you and best of luck on your OPI!

--From Andrea Campo's blog (<http://longingfortheheavenlycountry.blogspot.com/2012/01/tips-and-advice-for-spanish-opi.html>).