

Student Performance Level (SPL) Descriptors for Listening Comprehension and Oral Communication

The Student Performance Levels (SPLs) are descriptions of English language proficiency levels for adult non-native speakers of English. The SPLs were developed in the mid-1980s as part of the Mainstream English Language Training (MELT) project under the Office of Refugee Resettlement of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services.

The SPLs were developed so that teachers in the refugees camps such as the Philippines or Thailand and programs in the United States (where the learners would eventually go) could communicate effectively about adult learners' English skills.

The SPLs described general language ability as well as the four skills; listening comprehension, oral communication, reading, and writing. That is, the SPLs were developed so that a refugee program in Arlington, Virginia or Denver Colorado, or Bataan, Philippines, could all understand--generally--what it meant for a learner to be a SPL 3 in listening (for example).

With input from adult ESL practitioners around the United States, staff members at the Spring Institute for Intercultural Learning www.spring-institute.org/ updated the speaking and listening descriptors in 1998.

Taken from Grognet (1997) and U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (1985):
Grognet, A.G. (1997). *Performance-based curricula and outcomes: The mainstream English training project (MELT)-Updated for the 1990s and beyond*. Denver, CO: Spring Institute for International Studies.

U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Offices of Refugee Resettlement. (1985). *Competency-based mainstream English language training project (MELT) resource package*. Washington, DC: Author.

SPL	General Language Ability	Listening Comprehension	Oral Communication
0	No ability whatsoever	No ability whatsoever	No ability whatsoever
1	Functions minimally, if at all, in English. Can handle only very routine entry-level jobs that do not require oral communication, and in which all tasks can be easily demonstrated. A native speaker used to dealing with limited English speakers can rarely communicate with a person at this level except through gestures.	Understands only a few isolated words, and extremely simple learned phrases.	Vocabulary limited to a few isolated words. No control of grammar.
2	Functions in a very limited way in situations related to immediate needs. Can handle only routine entry-level jobs that do not require oral communication, and in which all tasks can be easily demonstrated. A native English speaker used to dealing with limited English speakers will have great difficulty communicating with a person at this level.	Understands a limited number of very simple learned phrases, spoken slowly with frequent repetitions.	Expresses a limited number of immediate survival needs using very simple learned phrases.
3	Functions with some difficulty in situations related to immediate needs. Can handle routine entry-level jobs that involve only the most basic oral communication, and in which all tasks can be demonstrated. A native English speaker used to dealing with limited English speakers will have great difficulty communicating with a person at this level.	Understands simple learned phrases, spoken slowly with frequent repetitions.	Expresses immediate survival needs using simple learned phrases.

SPL	General Language Ability	Listening Comprehension	Oral Communication
4	Can satisfy basic survival needs and a few very routine social demands. Can handle entry-level jobs that involve some simple oral communication, but in which tasks can be easily demonstrated. A native English speaker used to dealing with limited English speakers will have difficulty communicating with a person at this level.	Understands simple learned phrases easily, and some simple new phrases containing familiar vocabulary, spoken slowly with frequent repetitions.	Expresses basic survival needs including asking and responding to related questions, using both learned and a limited number of new phrases. Participates in basic conversations in a few very routine social situations. Speaks with hesitation and frequent pauses. Some control of basic grammar.
5	Can satisfy basic survival needs and some limited social demands. Can handle jobs and job training that involve following simple oral instructions but in which most tasks can also be demonstrated. A native English speaker used to dealing with limited English speakers will have some difficulty communicating with a person at this level.	Understands learned phrases easily and short new phrases containing familiar vocabulary spoken slowly with repetition. Has limited ability to understand on the telephone.	Functions independently in most face-to-face basic survival situations but needs some help. Asks and responds to direct questions on familiar and some unfamiliar subjects. Still relies on learned phrases but also uses new phrases (i.e., speaks with some creativity) but with hesitation and pauses. Communicates on the phone to express a limited number of survival needs, but with some difficulty. Participates in basic conversations in a limited number of social situations. Can occasionally clarify general meaning.

SPL	General Language Ability	Listening Comprehension	Oral Communication
6	Can satisfy most survival needs and limited social demands. Can handle jobs and job training that involve following simple oral and written instructions and diagrams. A native English speaker not used to dealing with limited English speakers will be able to communicate with a person at this level on familiar topics, but with difficulty and some effort.	Understands conversations containing some unfamiliar vocabulary on many everyday subjects, with a need for repetition, rewording or slower speech. Has some ability to understand without face-to-face contact (e.g. on the telephone, TV).	Functions independently in most survival situations, but needs some help. Relies less on learned phrases; speaks with creativity, but with hesitation. Communicates on the phone on familiar subjects but with some difficulty. Participates with some confidence in social situations when addressed directly. Can sometimes clarify general meaning by rewording. Control of basic grammar evident, but inconsistent; may attempt to use more difficult grammar but with almost no control.
7	Can satisfy survival needs and routine work and social demands. Can handle work that involves following oral and simple written instructions in familiar and some unfamiliar situations. A native English speaker not used to dealing with limited English speakers can generally communicate with a person at this level on familiar topics.	Understands conversations on most everyday subjects at normal speed when addressed directly; may need repetition, rewording, or slower speech. Understands routine work-related conversations. Increasing ability to understand without face-to-face contact (telephone, TV, radio). Has difficulty following conversation between native speakers.	Functions independently in survival and many social and work situations, but may need help occasionally. Communicates on the phone on familiar subjects. Expands on basic ideas in conversation, but still speaks with hesitation while searching for appropriate vocabulary and grammar. Clarifies general meaning easily, and can sometimes convey exact meaning. Controls basic grammar, but not more difficult grammar.

SPL	General Language Ability	Listening Comprehension	Oral Communication
8	Can participate effectively in social and familiar work situations. A native English speaker not used to dealing with limited English speakers can communicate with a person at this level on almost all topics.	Understands general conversation and conversation on technical subjects in own field. Understands without face-to-face contact (telephone, TV, radio); may have difficulty following rapid or colloquial speech. Understands most conversations between native speakers; may miss details if speech is very rapid or colloquial or if subject is unfamiliar.	Participates effectively in practical and social conversation and in technical discussions in own field. Speaks fluently in both familiar and unfamiliar situations; can handle problem situations. Conveys and explains exact meaning of complex ideas. Good control of grammar.
9	Can participate fluently and accurately in practical, social, and work situations. A native English speaker not used to dealing with limited English speakers can communicate easily with a person at this level.	Understands almost all speech in any context. Occasionally confused by highly colloquial or regional speech.	Approximates a native speaker's fluency and ability to convey own ideas precisely, even in unfamiliar situations. Speaks without effort. Excellent control of grammar with no apparent patterns of weakness.
10	Ability equal to that of a native speaker of the same socioeconomic level.	Equal to that of a native speaker of the same socioeconomic level.	Equal to that of a native speaker of the same socioeconomic level.

Student Performance Level (SPL) Descriptors for Reading and Writing

Note: These descriptors are for adult second language learners and do not represent K-12 grade level reading ability)

The descriptions below are averages across the range of what learners at the beginning of each level can do. Learners who are pre- or non-literate when they start to learn may move more slowly; learners who are fully literate in their native language may move faster. A pre-literate learner is one who comes from a society in which there was no written language, and therefore he/she has no exposure to print of any sort. Non-literate learners come from a society in which literacy is all around them (street signs, labels, newspapers), but they have no understanding of the concept of sound-symbol correspondence. (Note that learners whose native language is not written in the Roman alphabet will have special challenges in learning to read in English, no matter how literate they are.)

Reading is a combination of many different skills (e.g., sound-symbol correspondence, word recognition) and strategies (e.g., predicting, skimming for general meaning). Which skills and strategies adults choose to use while reading depend on the purpose of that reading. For example, when adults read a child's report card or a train schedule, they may scan to find grades in certain subjects or the arrival time of a certain train. When they read an article on nutrition, they may preview the headings and illustrations to get an idea what information might be included in the article. Readers predict information based on their experience and make inferences while making use of sound-symbol correspondence, word recognition, word order (syntactic information) and the meaning of the words (semantic information).

For second language learners, the reading process is more difficult. Their understanding of a text will be affected by their own cultural backgrounds and by literacy practices in their languages. They will not be able to make predictions from their experiences as easily as native English speakers. Also, spelling and word order may be very different in their native language. One way to introduce reading to second language learners is through texts that are relevant to their lives, which include familiar syntax and vocabulary, and predictable meaning. As students progress, texts on less familiar topics can be introduced. These will encourage students to employ an expanding array of skills and strategies as they develop their proficiency in reading in English.

Revisions to the original Student Performance Level Reading and Writing Level descriptions were prepared by Allene G. Grognet in consultation with ELT Partners (Myrna Ann Atkins, Miriam Burt, Burna Dunn, and other practitioners (Donna Moss, Peggy Seufert, Lynda Terrill, and Carol Van Duzer). January, 2003.

Reading Levels

- 0** No ability whatsoever in English.
- I** Individual recognizes most letters of the alphabet and may be able to read one's own name or a few isolated words. Has a developing sense of phonemic awareness. Can probably read own address, telephone number, and other relevant numbers.
- II** Individual can recognize upper and lower case letters and environmental print (e.g. common signs, symbols, prices, etc.).
- III** Individual can read and comprehend simple learned phrases or short sentences, containing familiar vocabulary in familiar contexts, e.g. "where do you live?" Has a limited understanding of connected prose, and may need frequent re-readings.
- IV** Individual reads and understands simple sentences or short paragraphs or messages on familiar subjects (e.g., people, places, events) containing familiar vocabulary.
- V** Individual can read simple material on subjects of personal interest that have a clear underlying structure (e.g. main idea and supporting details) and can use some context to determine meaning.
- VI** Individual can read authentic instructions, descriptions, and narratives on familiar subjects or from which new vocabulary can be determined by context (e.g., a simple news story). Can recognize logical order and make some minimal inferences. Emerging reading strategies are evident, (e.g., can compare and contrast, sequence information, etc.).
- VII** Individual can read and understand material related to most adult roles. Can interpret descriptive narratives, predict, and infer meaning from material on familiar topics. Can skim and scan for meaning e.g. consumer information, manuals, memos.
- VIII** Individual can read and understand authentic material on unfamiliar topics, but may have trouble with difficult vocabulary or grammar. Skims and scans, compares, contrasts, and sequences information with consistency. Understands the purpose of various texts (e.g., editorials, ads).

Revised Writing Levels

The descriptions below are averages across the range of what learners at the beginning of each level can do. Writing enhances language acquisition as learners experiment with words, sentences, and larger chunks of writing to communicate their ideas effectively and to reinforce the grammar and vocabulary they're learning in class. Writing includes two different skills: producing the correct printed symbol to represent sound (encoding speech) and the ability to arrange thoughts logically and coherently (cognitive writing) depending on the purpose and audience. There are also the conventions of writing such as spelling, punctuation, capitalization, and paragraph formation.

Second language learners who are pre- or non-literate may have difficulty holding a pen or pencil and may also have difficulty with directionality (e.g., left to right, top to bottom). Learners who are literate in their native language may bring their cultural perceptions and expectations of appropriate organization and methods of expression to their writing. These may differ from English writing conventions. Learners can benefit from using examples of writings, outlines, and graphic organizers (e.g., Venn diagrams, webs) to prepare their writing. Grammar and vocabulary development should be integrated with writing instruction.

Writing Levels

- 0** No ability whatsoever in English.
- I** Individual can copy letters of the alphabet, numbers, own name and address. Individual may have difficulty using a writing instrument.
- II** Individual can write basic personal information and numbers and can complete simple forms. Can write sight words and may be able to write simple messages using learned phrases.
- III** Individual can write short sentences on basic personal information and on familiar subjects. There is emerging use of punctuation (e.g. period and question mark).
- IV** Individual can write simple sentences, notes and messages on familiar subjects, may write simple paragraphs. Has limited grammatical accuracy. Inconsistent use of the mechanics of writing, including capitalization, period, and question mark.
- V** Individual can write simple narrative descriptions on familiar topics (e.g. customs in native country, personal life experiences, note to teacher, etc.) Attempts to elaborate on main idea. Grammar is still inconsistent. Is gaining control of mechanics of writing.
- VI** Individual can write simple, multi-paragraph narratives. Can logically organize connected prose. Grammar is more consistent, with some use of transitions (and, but, although, yet, etc.). More control of mechanics of writing.
- VII** Individual can perform everyday writing tasks and write descriptive and narrative prose for a variety of purposes and audiences. Uses more complex structures. Can elaborate on subject; writing is more fluid. Uses appropriate mechanics of writing.
- VIII** Individual can write, giving relevant detail, and using appropriate tone and purpose. Writing is fluid. Grammatical errors do not impede meaning. Uses appropriate mechanics of writing.