

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.

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.

SPL	General Language Ability	Listening Comprehension	Oral Communication
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.
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.
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.

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.

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.