

Overview of the Proficiency Level Descriptors

The Proficiency Level Descriptors (PLDs) provide an overview of stages of English language development that English learners are expected to progress through as they gain increasing proficiency in English as a new language. The PLDs describe student knowledge, skills, and abilities across a continuum, identifying what ELs know and can do at early stages and at exit from each of three proficiency levels: Emerging, Expanding, and Bridging². These descriptors are intended to be used as a guide for teachers and curriculum developers to provide ELs with targeted instruction in English language development as well as differentiated instruction in academic content areas.

It is important to note that while the PLDs describe an aligned set of knowledge, skills, and abilities at each proficiency level that reflect a linear progression across the levels, this is done for purposes of presentation and understanding: Actual second language acquisition does not necessarily occur in a linear fashion within or across proficiency levels. An EL at any given point along his or her trajectory of English learning may exhibit some abilities (e.g., speaking skills) at a higher proficiency level, while at the same time exhibiting other abilities (e.g., writing skills) at a lower proficiency level³. Additionally, a student may successfully perform a particular skill at a lower proficiency level (such as reading and analyzing an informational text) and at the next higher proficiency level need review in the same reading and analysis skills when presented with a new or more complex type of informational text. Thus, while a student may be identified—based on state assessment results and other state and local criteria—as being eligible for English language services appropriate to a particular proficiency level, the student’s actual abilities may vary by language domain (e.g., listening, speaking, reading, writing). For the same reason, a proficiency level does not identify a student (e.g., “Emerging student”), but rather identifies what a student knows and can do at a particular stage of English language development, for example: “a student at the Emerging level,” or “a student whose listening comprehension ability is at the Emerging level.”

The CA ELD Standards describe the knowledge, skills, and abilities in English as a new language that are expected **at exit from each proficiency level**, with the highest level, Bridging, being aligned to the California’s Common Core State Standards for English Language Arts, Literacy in History/Social Studies, Science, and Technical Subjects. These exit descriptors signal high expectations for ELs to progress through all levels and to attain the academic English language they need to access and engage with grade-level content in all content areas. Note also that the

² As there is currently no available empirical evidence to support a particular number of ELD proficiency levels as optimal, the development and design of the PLDs for the CA ELD Standards was based on common practices in the state of grouping ELs into three levels for purposes of instruction. These practices were confirmed by practitioners, administrators, and academic researchers throughout the state as part of the ELD standards validation process, as well as by guidance documents such as the Framework for English Language Proficiency/Development Standards Corresponding to the Common Core State Standards and the Next Generation Science Standards. Council of Chief State School Officers (2012). *Framework for English language proficiency development standards corresponding to the common core state standards and the next generation science standards*. Washington DC: Author.

³ See, for example, the discussion on pp. 26–27 in Gottlieb, M. (2006). *Assessing English language learners: Bridges from language proficiency to academic achievement*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin Press.

proficiency level descriptors include specifications at “early stages” and at “exit” for each of the three levels, providing valuable information that can be used for determining meaningful performance level distinctions based on assessment results.

Organization of the Proficiency Level Descriptors

The organization of the PLDs represents English language development as a continuum of increasing proficiency in language learning and use, starting with **native language** competencies students possess when they enter school, and concluding (though not ending) with **lifelong language learning** that all language users engage in⁴. The three levels are labeled to represent three stages of English language development, describing expectations for how well students can understand and use the English language at each level as they continue to build on existing language skills and knowledge.

- **Emerging:** Students at this level typically progress very quickly, learning to use English for immediate needs as well as beginning to understand and use academic vocabulary and other features of academic language.
- **Expanding:** Students at this level are challenged to increase their English skills in more contexts, and learn a greater variety of vocabulary and linguistic structures, applying their growing language skills in more sophisticated ways appropriate to their age and grade level.
- **Bridging:** Students at this level continue to learn and apply a range of high-level English language skills in a wide variety of contexts, including comprehension and production of highly technical texts. The “bridge” alluded to is the transition to full engagement in grade-level academic tasks and activities in a variety of content areas without the need for specialized ELD instruction. However, ELs at *all* levels of English language proficiency fully participate in grade level tasks in all content areas with varying degrees of scaffolding in order to develop both content knowledge and English.

The PLDs also emphasize that ELs at all proficiency levels are capable of high-level thinking and can engage in complex, cognitively demanding social and academic activities requiring language as long as they are provided appropriate linguistic support. The ***extent of support needed varies depending on the familiarity and complexity of the task and topic, as well as on the student’s language proficiency level.*** Within the PLDs, three general levels of support are identified: **Substantial, Moderate, and Light**. The descriptors for these general levels of support are intended to signal the extent of linguistic scaffolding most likely needed for implementing the CA ELD Standards appropriately at each proficiency level. They are not intended to explain how to provide support or differentiate instruction for ELs at each level.

Each proficiency level descriptor also includes the following sections:

- **Overall Proficiency:** A general descriptor of ELs’ abilities at *entry to, progress through, and exit from* the level;

⁴ Note that the concept of “lifelong language learning” for proficient users of English (as well as other languages) is distinct from that of “long term English learners” who have not been supported to progress to full proficiency in English.

- **Early Stages:** Descriptors of abilities in English language that ELs have *at the early stages* of the level; and
- **Exit Stages:** Descriptors of abilities in English language students have *at exit from* the level. The descriptors for early and exit stages of each proficiency level are detailed across:
- Three Modes of Communication:
 - **Collaborative** (engagement in dialogue with others);
 - **Interpretive** (comprehension and analysis of written and spoken texts); and
 - **Productive** (creation of oral presentations and written texts); and
- Two dimensions of Knowledge of Language:
 - **Metalinguistic Awareness:** The extent of language awareness and self-monitoring students have at the level; and
 - **Accuracy of Production:** The extent of accuracy in production ELs can be expected to exhibit at the level; English learners increase in accuracy of linguistic production as they develop proficiency in English. ***Accuracy may vary within a level depending on context, such as extent of cognitive demand or familiarity of a task.***

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Student Capacities	English Language Development: Proficiency Level Continuum →-----Emerging-----→-----Expanding-----→			
<p>Native Language</p> <p>English learners come to school possessing a wide range of competencies in their native language appropriate to their age. They may have varying levels of literacy in their native language depending on their prior experiences in the home, community, and school. As learners of English as a new language, they gain metacognitive awareness of what language is and how it is used and apply this awareness in their language learning strategies, including drawing upon knowledge of their native language.</p>	<p>Overall Proficiency</p> <p>English learners <i>enter</i> the Emerging level having limited receptive and productive English skills.</p> <p>As they <i>progress through</i> the Emerging level, they start to respond to more varied communication tasks using learned words and phrases with increasing ease.</p>	<p>Overall Proficiency</p> <p>At <i>exit</i> from the Emerging level, students have basic English communication skills in social and academic contexts.</p>	<p>Overall Proficiency</p> <p>As English learners <i>progress through</i> the Expanding level, they move from being able to refashion learned phrases and sentences in English to meet their immediate communication and learning needs towards being able to increasingly engage in using the English language in more complex, cognitively demanding situations.</p>	<p>Overall Proficiency</p> <p>At <i>exit</i> from the Expanding level, students can use English to learn and communicate about a range of topics and academic content areas.</p>
<p>High Level Thinking with Linguistic Support</p> <p>English learners possess cognitive abilities appropriate to their age and experience. In order to communicate about their thinking as they learn English, they may need <i>varying linguistic support depending on the linguistic and cognitive demand of the task</i>.</p>	<p>General Extent of Support: Substantial</p> <p>Students at the <i>early stages</i> of the Emerging level can engage in complex, cognitively demanding social and academic activities requiring language when provided substantial linguistic support; as they develop more familiarity and ease with understanding and using English, support may be moderate or light for familiar tasks or topics.</p>		<p>General Extent of Support: Moderate</p> <p>Students at the <i>early stages</i> of the Expanding level can engage in complex, cognitively demanding social and academic activities requiring language when provided moderate linguistic support; as they develop increasing ease with understanding and using English in a variety of contexts, support may be light for familiar tasks or topics.</p>	

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English Language Development: Proficiency Level Continuum →-----Bridging-----→		Lifelong Language Learning
<p>Overall Proficiency</p> <p>As English learners <i>progress through</i> the Bridging level, they move from being able to communicate in ways appropriate to different tasks, purposes, and audiences in a variety of social and academic contexts towards being able to refine and enhance their English language competencies in a broader range of contexts.</p>	<p>Overall Proficiency</p> <p>At <i>exit</i> from the Bridging level, students can communicate effectively with various audiences on a wide range of familiar and new topics to meet academic demands in a variety of disciplines.</p>	<p>Overall Proficiency</p> <p>Students who have reached “proficiency” in the English language as determined by state and/or local criteria continue to build increasing breadth, depth, and complexity in comprehending and communicating in English in a wide variety of contexts.</p>
<p>General Extent of Support: Light</p> <p>Students at the <i>early stages</i> of the Bridging level can engage in complex, cognitively demanding social and academic activities requiring language when provided light linguistic support; as they develop increasing ease with understanding and using highly technical English, support may not be necessary for familiar tasks or topics using everyday English.</p>		<p>General Extent of Support: Occasional</p> <p>Students who have <i>exited</i> the Bridging level benefit from occasional linguistic support in their ongoing learning of English.</p>

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Mode of Communication	English Language Development: Proficiency Level Continuum			
	→-----Emerging-----→		-----Expanding-----→	
	At the <i>early stages</i> of the Emerging level, students are able to:	At <i>exit</i> from the Emerging level, students are able to:	At the <i>early stages</i> of the Expanding level, students are able to:	At <i>exit</i> from the Expanding level, students are able to:
Collaborative	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> express basic personal and safety needs, ideas, and respond to questions on social and academic topics with gestures and words or short phrases; use basic social conventions to participate in conversations; 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> express basic personal and safety needs, ideas, and respond to questions on social and academic topics with phrases and short sentences; participate in simple, face-to-face conversations with peers and others; 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> express a variety of personal needs, ideas, and opinions and respond to questions using short sentences; initiate simple conversations on social and academic topics; 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> express more complex feelings, needs, ideas, and opinions using extended oral and written production; respond to questions using extended discourse participate actively in collaborative conversations in all content areas with moderate to light support as appropriate;
Interpretive	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> comprehend frequently occurring words and basic phrases in immediate physical surroundings; read very brief grade-appropriate text with simple sentences and familiar vocabulary, supported by graphics or pictures; comprehend familiar words, phrases, and questions drawn from content areas; 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> comprehend a sequence of information on familiar topics as presented through stories and face-to-face conversations; read brief grade-appropriate text with simple sentences and mostly familiar vocabulary, supported by graphics or pictures; demonstrate understanding of words and phrases from previously learned content material; 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> comprehend information on familiar topics and on some unfamiliar topics in contextualized settings; independently read a variety of grade-appropriate text with simple sentences ; read more complex text supported by graphics or pictures; comprehend basic concepts in content areas; 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> comprehend detailed information with fewer contextual clues on unfamiliar topics; read increasingly complex grade-level text while relying on context and prior knowledge to obtain meaning from print; read technical text on familiar topics supported by pictures or graphics;
Productive	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> produce learned words and phrases and use gestures to communicate basic information; express ideas using visuals such as drawings or charts, or graphic organizers; and write or use familiar words and phrases related to everyday and academic topics. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> produce basic statements and ask questions in direct informational exchanges on familiar and routine subjects; express ideas using information and short responses within structured contexts; and write or use learned vocabulary drawn from academic content areas. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> produce sustained informational exchanges with others on an expanding variety of topics; express ideas in highly structured and scaffolded academic interactions; and write or use expanded vocabulary to provide information and extended responses in contextualized settings. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> produce, initiate, and sustain spontaneous interactions on a variety of topics; and write and express ideas to meet most social and academic needs through the recombination of learned vocabulary and structures with support.

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Mode of Communication	English Language Development: Proficiency Level Continuum →-----Bridging-----→	
	At the <i>early stages</i> of the Bridging level, students are able to:	At <i>exit</i> from the Bridging level, students are able to:
Collaborative	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> express increasingly complex feelings, needs, ideas, and opinions in a variety of settings; respond to questions using extended, more elaborated discourse initiate and sustain dialogue on a variety of grade-level academic and social topics; 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> participate fully in all collaborative conversations in all content areas at grade level with occasional support as necessary; participate fully in both academic and non-academic settings requiring English;
Interpretive	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> comprehend concrete and many abstract topics and begin to recognize language subtleties in a variety of communicative settings; read increasingly complex text at grade level; read technical text supported by pictures or graphics; 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> comprehend concrete and abstract topics and recognize language subtleties in a variety of communicative settings; read, with limited comprehension difficulty, a variety of grade-level and technical texts, in all content areas;
Productive	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> produce, initiate, and sustain interactions with increasing awareness of tailoring language to specific purposes and audiences; and write and express ideas to meet increasingly complex academic demands for specific purposes and audiences. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> produce, initiate, and sustain extended interactions tailored to specific purposes and audiences; and write and express ideas to meet a variety of social needs and academic demands for specific purposes and audiences.

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Knowledge of Language	English Language Development: Proficiency Level Continuum			
	→-----Emerging-----→		→-----Expanding-----→	
	At the <i>early stages</i> of the Emerging level, students are able to:	At <i>exit</i> from the Emerging level, students are able to:	At the <i>early stages</i> of the Expanding level, students are able to:	At <i>exit</i> from the Expanding level, students are able to:
Metalinguistic Awareness	Apply to their learning of English an emerging awareness about: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> differences and similarities between their native language and English; ways in which different kinds of language are appropriate for different tasks, purposes, and audiences; and how to: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> intentionally and purposefully use a limited range of everyday vocabulary, phrases, and memorized statements and questions in English; 	Apply to their learning of English an awareness about: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> differences and similarities between their native language and English; ways in which different kinds of language are appropriate for different tasks, purposes, and audiences; and how to: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> intentionally and purposefully use mostly everyday, and a limited range of general academic vocabulary and domain-specific vocabulary, phrases, and memorized statements and questions in English related mostly to familiar topics; 	Apply to their learning of English an expanding awareness about: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> differences and similarities between their native language and English; ways in which language may be different based on task, purpose, and audience; and how to: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> intentionally and purposefully use mostly everyday vocabulary, and an expanding range of general academic and domain-specific vocabulary in English related mostly to familiar topics; extend discourse in limited ways in a range of conversations; recognize language differences and engage in some self-monitoring; 	Apply to their learning of English awareness about: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> differences and similarities between their native language and English; ways in which language may be different based on task, purpose, and audience; and how to: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> intentionally and purposefully use both everyday vocabulary and a range of general academic and domain-specific vocabulary in English related to familiar and new topics; extend discourse in a variety of ways in a range of conversations; recognize language differences, engage in self-monitoring, and adjust oral and written language;
Accuracy of Production	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> be comprehensible when using memorized or copied words or phrases; and may exhibit frequent errors in pronunciation, grammar, and writing conventions that often impede meaning. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> be comprehensible when using simple or learned phrases and sentences; and may exhibit frequent errors in pronunciation, grammar, and writing conventions that sometimes impede meaning. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> be comprehensible when using simple and some expanded sentences and discourse or texts; and may exhibit fairly frequent errors in pronunciation, grammar, and writing conventions that may sometimes impede meaning. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> be comprehensible when using expanded sentences, discourse or texts; and may exhibit fairly frequent errors in pronunciation, grammar, and writing conventions that usually do not impede meaning.

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Knowledge of Language	English Language Development: Proficiency Level Continuum →-----Bridging-----→	
	At the <i>early stages</i> of the Bridging level, students are able to:	At <i>exit</i> from the Bridging level, students are able to:
Metalinguistic Awareness	<p>Apply to their learning of English a sophisticated awareness about:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • differences and similarities between their native language and English to learning English; • ways in which language may be different based on task, purpose, and audience; <p>and how to:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • intentionally and purposefully use a range of precise and varied grade-level general academic and domain-specific vocabulary in English related to new topics; • extend grade-level academic discourse in a variety of ways in a range of conversations and written texts of varying lengths and complexities; • recognize language differences, engage in self-monitoring, and adjust oral and written language in a range of contexts; 	<p>Apply to their learning of English a sophisticated awareness about:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • differences and similarities between their native language and English to learning English; • ways in which language may be different based on task, purpose, and audience; <p>and how to:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • intentionally and purposefully use a range of precise and varied grade-level general academic and domain-specific vocabulary in English related to new topics across the disciplines; • extend grade-level academic discourse in a variety of ways in a range of conversations and written texts of varying lengths and complexities across the disciplines; • recognize language differences, engage in self-monitoring, and adjust oral and written language in a range of contexts across the disciplines;
Accuracy of Production	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • be comprehensible when using a variety of grade-level expanded discourse or texts; and • may exhibit some errors in pronunciation, grammar, and writing conventions that usually do not impede meaning. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • be comprehensible when using a variety of grade-level expanded discourse or texts on a variety of topics; and • may exhibit some minor errors in pronunciation, grammar, and writing conventions that do not impede meaning.