

## **Interagency Language Roundtable Skill Level Descriptions for Proficiency – Listening**

### **Preface**

The following Interagency Language Roundtable (ILR) Skill Level Descriptions (SLDs) describe proficiency as the functional ability to comprehend spoken language that reflects current usage. The SLDs characterize proficiency ranging from no communicative ability to mastery. They constitute an ordinal scale that includes six ranked base levels from 0 to 5. They illustrate, but do not exhaustively characterize, the proficiency a person may demonstrate at a given level on the scale.

Control of a base level (Levels 1, 2, 3, 4, and 5) typically implies control of the previous levels' aspects. A higher level of performance in one aspect does not justify a higher general proficiency rating. Level 5 includes the features of all levels. Still, as with all levels, Level 5 is a range and performance will vary.

There are plus levels for levels 0 through 4. Plus levels describe proficiency that substantially exceeds one base level and does not fully meet the criteria of the next base level. To merit a plus level, the demonstrated proficiency must match the plus level description and not be merely a strong performance at the base level.

The SLDs describe four aspects of language proficiency: functional ability, precision of forms and meanings, content meaningfulness, and contextual appropriateness. Functional ability refers to the communicative acts or tasks that an individual can accomplish. There are no functional abilities specific to the plus levels. Precision of forms and meanings refers to accuracy, range, and complexity. Content meaningfulness refers to the relevance and substantive coverage of topics. Contextual appropriateness refers to register, acceptability, and appropriateness of language for the intended audience.

The SLDs are presented in an official prose version. Each level description begins with a bolded main statement that summarizes the features of that level. Supporting statements follow the main statement and describe the four aspects in detail.

### **Level 0 (No Proficiency)**

**Unable to understand the spoken language in almost any context.** Has essentially no ability to understand spoken communication. Understanding is limited to occasional isolated words.

### **Level 0+ (Memorized Proficiency)**

**Able to understand some memorized, isolated words and phrases with random accuracy and little regard to context.** Can recognize some discrete words and memorized phrases. Can understand minimal exchanges, such as formulaic questions and utterances. Most understanding is of telegraphic exchanges. Understanding of vocabulary is extremely limited and random. Understanding limited to memorized structures. Has great difficulty distinguishing different sounds and tones. Understands isolated random words and phrases. Generally unable to identify the topic. Does not understand most words and phrases. May be able to recognize common greetings and introductions, though cannot distinguish between formal and informal forms outside of memorized constructions. Rarely understands in non-participatory listening unless supported by redundancy or context. Needs interlocutor to slow down, repeat, and paraphrase.

### **Level 1 (Elementary Proficiency)**

**Able to understand simple spoken language dealing with basic information, often with great difficulty and in limited contexts.** Understands general subject matter in simple spoken material. Can understand straightforward instructions and simple statements and questions. Can understand explicitly stated simple messages in non-participatory listening when supported by redundancy or context. Understands connected phrases and sentences in simple speech. Understands some high frequency vocabulary. Understands some basic structures. May distinguish some different sounds and tones. Understanding is limited to self, family, or immediate environment, including, but not limited to, meals, time, directions, simple transactions, or personal information. Can identify general subject matter in some simple speech. Generally understands short exchanges and statements. Able to understand speech that fills basic courtesy requirements. Not able to distinguish formality other than in simple phrases and expressions. Demonstrates an extremely limited understanding of cultural norms and expectations. Cannot easily understand mood, feeling, or emotion conveyed in speech. Understands some spoken language during participatory listening, particularly if delivered at a slower rate than normal, with frequent repetitions or paraphrase.

### **Level 1+ (Elementary Proficiency, Plus)**

**Able to understand simple speech in areas beyond most basic needs, though inaccurately and not always appropriately.** Understands most high frequency vocabulary. Has limited understanding of organizational devices. May understand some major historical or cultural references. Has inconsistent understanding of basic structures. Understands some main points

and some details in spoken language about personal life, such as family, activities, and work in short exchanges and messages. Can recognize some formal and informal forms of speech, yet with limited understanding of basic social norms and etiquette. May recognize some instances of mood, feeling, or emotion in speech. Demonstrates little understanding of cultural norms and expectations in routine speech, but with little understanding of cultural norms and expectations in routine speech. Understanding is uneven at a normal rate of speech and impeded by complexity and high rates of speech.

## **Level 2 (Limited Working Proficiency)**

**Able to adequately understand straightforward spoken language on everyday topics, including routine work-related matters.** Can understand speech in everyday interactions. Can understand the main ideas and some details in material intended for general audiences, such as straightforward descriptions, instructions, and narrations across timeframes. In general, lacks command of the language to draw inferences. Can understand speech that conveys sequencing of connected phrases. Has some understanding of frequently used rhetorical devices, such as repetition and exaggeration. Can readily understand high frequency vocabulary and sometimes understand references to major historical or cultural events. Generally understands information presented in almost all basic structures. Usually understands standard pronunciation, but not typically implication of stress, intonation, and tone (in tonal languages). Understands spoken language about personal life, such as family, activities, and work, or major current events. Understands most main points and some details. Understands exchanges and messages, but cannot sustain comprehension of extended speech. May demonstrate some understanding of common cultural norms, albeit inconsistently. Understands basic social norms and etiquette, though has little understanding of the social conventions of conversations. Can recognize formal and informal forms of speech. May be able to recognize some mood, feeling, emotion, or position in speech. Understands straightforward spoken language delivered at a normal rate, but complexity or high rates of speech impede understanding.

## **Level 2+ (Limited Working Proficiency, Plus)**

**Able to understand spoken language in many informal and everyday contexts; however, understanding is not always complete in some formal and professional contexts.** May understand some instances of common rhetorical devices such as simile and metaphor. Readily understands high frequency vocabulary and shows some inconsistency in mid frequency vocabulary. May understand some widely used idiomatic language and cultural references, though not fully. Understands a variety of structures, including some complex structures, but not consistently. Understands spoken language about personal life, major current events, and some matters of general interest. Understands main points and some key details. Understands extended speech, but not consistently. May understand cultural norms and expectations in routine and some professional speech. Sometimes understands formal and informal forms of speech. Has some understanding of the social conventions of conversations, while the

understanding of mood, feeling, emotion, or position in speech is inconsistent. Understands speech delivered at a normal rate.

### **Level 3 (General Professional Proficiency)**

**Able to understand formal and informal spoken language with accuracy on general social and professional topics and tasks.** Can understand argumentation expressed through supported opinion, conjecture, and hypothesis. Can draw inferences from speech. Can get the gist of more sophisticated speech, but may be unable to detect or understand subtlety or nuance. Able to understand cohesive discourse with clear relationships of ideas found in genres such as speeches, lectures, and briefings. Understands commonly used rhetorical devices such as simile and metaphor. Readily understands a broad range of vocabulary, including mid frequency terms and technical vocabulary in the area of professional specialty. Understands widely used idiomatic expressions and cultural references. Understands a variety of structures accurately, but occasional misunderstandings occur in complex structures. Misunderstandings of implications of stress, intonation, and tone may still occur, but they rarely impede overall comprehension. Can understand speech about one's own fields of competence and matters of general interest. Understands main points and many key details, including some implicit meanings. Understands extended speech consistently. Understands common cultural norms and expectations in routine and professional speech, though may have difficulty with texts that rely on cultural knowledge. Understands some social conventions of conversations and presentations. Usually understands formal and informal forms of speech in various settings. Generally understands mood, feeling, emotion, or stance including some emotional overtones, such as the use of irony, sarcasm, or humor. Understands speech delivered at a normal rate with ease, but may have some difficulty with fast spoken language.

### **Level 3+ (General Professional Proficiency, Plus)**

**Able to understand with accuracy some culturally appropriate speech tailored to some audiences on a range of topics.** Can understand some rhetorical devices for targeted effect or emphasis. Lexicon is broad. Understands some low frequency words and phrases, though with some inaccuracy. Understands some elaborate discourse including some complex structures, though misunderstandings occur. Understands some cultural references across different contexts. Can understand many professional topics, and to some degree concepts relating to social, cultural, and theoretical topics. Understands the relationships between ideas, including some implicit meanings. Understands some cultural norms and expectations in a variety of interactions. May understand language that is tailored to an audience. Sometimes understands the subtleties and nuances of mood, feeling, emotion, or stance. Can understand most spoken language effortlessly.

### **Level 4 (Advanced Professional Proficiency)**

**Able to understand with considerable precision speech using culturally appropriate language tailored to a variety of audiences on a wide range of topics.**

Understands language tailored to different audiences, including persuasion, representation, counseling, and negotiation.

Understands the implications of spoken texts in the broader cultural, political, or social contexts of the intended audience. Can readily follow turns of thought. Understands complex speech characterized by intentional shifts of topic and tone and many rhetorical devices used for effect or emphasis. Has an extensive understanding of vocabulary, including many low frequency words and phrases and many cultural references. Understands many complex structures, including complex embedding. Sporadically misunderstands. Understands a variety of pronunciation patterns, stress, intonation and tone (in tonal languages). Can understand many social, cultural, and theoretical topics, including those which do not bear directly on a professional specialty. Understands the relationships between ideas to arrive at a broader view or new perspective, including many implicit meanings. Understands many cultural norms and expectations in a variety of contexts. Usually understands tailored speech and register shifts. Understands most social conventions of conversations and presentations. Usually understands the subtleties and nuances of mood, feeling, emotion, or stance, including emotional overtones, such as the use of irony, sarcasm, or humor. Can understand nearly all spoken language effortlessly.

**Level 4+ (Advanced Professional Proficiency, Plus)**

**Able to understand precise spoken language that uses diverse linguistic resources to present articulate, tailored, and nuanced language in most contexts, with only rare mistakes.**

Understands a wide range of rhetorical devices. Understands most nuanced, low frequency vocabulary, idioms, colloquialisms, and cultural references across different contexts. Understands a wide range of complex structures accurately, though a few misunderstandings may occur. Can understand most topics and their implications to some extent. Understands most cultural norms and expectations in a variety of contexts. Understands tailored speech and register shifts. Usually understands how mood, feeling, emotion, or stance are used for effect, such as to evoke an emotional response, or add emphasis, certainty, uncertainty, or authority.

**Level 5 (Functionally Native Proficiency)**

**Able to understand clear and precise speech that uses diverse linguistic resources to produce articulate, nuanced, and engaging language in almost any context.**

Can understand almost any official, semi-official, and non-professional speech tailored to a specific audience, purpose, task, or setting. Understands atypical texts with diverse concepts or perspectives woven together. Demonstrates a mastery of the language. Understands almost all genres of spoken language and rhetorical devices. Understands almost all nuanced and low frequency vocabulary, as well as idioms, colloquialisms, and cultural references. Understands almost all structures of the language at all levels. Can understand in detail the implications of almost any topic. Understands almost all cultural norms and expectations of speech. Understands tailored speech, register shifts, and their implications. Understands how mood, feeling, emotion, or

stance are used for effect, such as to evoke an emotional response, or add emphasis, certainty, uncertainty, or authority.