Reference Performance Level Descriptors:
Outcome of a National Working Session on Defining an "English Proficient" Performance Standard

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CCSSO
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The Council of Chief State School Officers (CCSSO) is a nonpartisan, nationwide, nonprofit organization of public officials who head departments of elementary and secondary education in the states, the District of Columbia, the Department of Defense Education Activity, and five U.S. extra-state jurisdictions. CCSSO provides leadership, advocacy, and technical assistance on major educational issues. The Council seeks member consensus on major educational issues and expresses their views to civic and professional organizations, federal agencies, Congress, and the public.

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Note to Reader:
This document is the second in a series of working papers that elaborate on a framework of four key stages in moving toward a common definition of English learner (EL), as described in the CCSSO publication, *Toward a "common definition of English learner": Guidance for states and state assessment consortia in defining and addressing policy and technical issues and options* (Linquanti & Cook, 2013). It presents a set of Reference Performance Level Descriptors developed as a result of guidance provided at a national working session of state and consortium representatives, experts and stakeholders held on September 17, 2013 at the Washington, D.C. offices of CCSSO. (Participants and the institutions they represented are listed in Appendix A). Specifically, the working session deliberated on the CCSSO guidance document's third stage: defining an "English proficient" performance standard.

Background

This document is the second in a series of working papers that elaborate on a framework of four key stages in moving toward a federally-required common definition of English learner for states participating in four of the multistate assessment consortia, as described in the Council of Chief State School Officers (CCSSO) publication, *Toward a "common definition of English learner": Guidance for states and state assessment consortia in defining and addressing policy and technical issues and options* (Linquanti & Cook, 2013). This working paper addresses a key aspect of the CCSSO guidance document's third stage – defining an "English proficient" performance standard.

The CCSSO guidance posits that a key step needed to define an "English proficient" performance standard is the development of common (or comparable) performance level descriptors (PLDs) of English language proficiency (section 3.a, p. 12). The Reference PLDs presented below were developed to support the enactment of this aspect of the guidance, as the two academic assessment consortia expressed urgent interest in this topic, given the consortium assessment field testing to be held in Spring 2014. An initial draft of the Reference PLDs was shared and discussed extensively at a national working session of state and consortium representatives, experts on English language proficiency (ELP) and ELP assessment, and other stakeholders[1] held on September 17, 2013 at the Washington, D.C. offices of CCSSO. Following this review and feedback on the initial draft, the following set of Reference PLDs was developed.

What the Reference PLDs Are

Rather than attempt to develop a single, common set of ELP performance level descriptors to be used by all states and consortia, the participants advised the development of a reference tool to *enable the comparison of* state/consortium-specific ELP levels when such comparisons are needed. The Reference PLDs were created by carefully examining and amalgamating PLDs available from several states (e.g., Arizona, California, and Texas) and consortia (i.e., ELPA21, WIDA/ASSETS). They represent common elements of ELP performance outlined across all of the aforementioned states and consortia. The Reference PLDs are designed to serve as a common reference point for "translating" English proficiency level categorizations (e.g., the proficiency level information from a state/consortium with 5 levels to that of a state/consortium with 3 levels). This supports a common understanding of the designations of low, moderate, or high proficiency in English across these state educational agencies and consortia. Such comparisons or translations must and will be made by assessment consortia that include states with differing systems of ELP classification; the Reference PLDs can support these comparisons by providing a common lens.

What the Reference PLDs Are Not

1. The Reference PLDs are not intended to replace any state's or consortium's existing English language proficiency levels or PLDs.
2. They are not intended to revise or improve upon any existing English language proficiency PLDs or classifications.

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[1] Participants and the institutions they represented are listed in Appendix A.

3. They are not standards, nor are they designed to revise or improve upon current English language development standards.
4. The Reference PLDs have not been validated for application to individual English learners; thus, they are not meant to be used to classify the performance of an individual student moving across states or consortia, a purpose for which ELP screeners are intended and better suited.

Composition of the Reference PLDs

Source of items: All proficiency level descriptors on the Reference PLD chart were drawn directly or adapted from the English language proficiency PLDs of Arizona, California, Texas, the ELPA 21 Consortium, and the WIDA Consortium. Individual elements from these state or consortia PLDs do not appear as originally written; revision was undertaken to facilitate coherence and consistency of the Reference PLDs. The overall goal was to identify common language elements found across these state and consortia PLDs, and incorporate them into the Reference PLDs.

Organization: The Reference PLDs are organized in three ways:
1. *Proficiency levels.* A review of the above-mentioned state and consortium documents revealed a range in the number of proficiency levels from 3 to 6. Working session participants suggested adopting 3 proficiency levels, that number being the "least common denominator" to which classification systems could be reduced. These levels are labeled in the Reference PLDs as "low," "moderate," and "high." Level names were chosen to assure no match to existing state or consortia PLDs.
2. *Language features.* The Reference PLDs identify the quantity and characteristics of *words, sentences, and discourse features* that English learners exhibit at the three proficiency levels.
3. *Modalities and Skills.* The Reference PLDs are arrayed in a 2 x 2 matrix comprised of oral and text-based modalities and productive and receptive skills. Within this matrix, the common domain labels of speaking, listening, reading, and writing can be identified as watermarks.

Functional Language: Several examples of functional language use across the three levels of English language proficiency are provided. These examples are not intended to provide a comprehensive view of functional language use. They merely provide contextualized samples of language used for academic purposes across several example disciplines.

Dimensions of Change in Language Proficiency

Given that performance level descriptor examples and illustrations of functional language use are illustrative, the following descriptions of language proficiency development may be useful in deciding how state or consortium PLDs map onto the Reference PLDs.

As conceptualized by Bailey and Heritage (2013), language proficiency increases along a predictable set of dimensions, each of which represent a student's ability to construct and convey meaning through language:
1. *Increase in amount:* the number or sophistication of words or ways of combining words (phrases, clauses)

2. *Increase in repertoire of use:* the types of relationships students can construct between ideas – e.g., additive, causal, conditional, contrastive – as well as the number of ways students are able to construct those relationships between ideas
3. *Increase in accuracy:* the students' ability to construct precise meanings
4. *Increase in contextualization:* the students' ability to tailor the use of language functions to fit a variety of sociocultural contexts

Additionally, an examination of state and consortium PLDs reveals a fifth dimension:

5. *Increase in autonomy:* the students' autonomy with the language, which is observed by the need for fewer language supports and scaffolds as proficiency increases

Next Steps
States or consortia can map their specific PLDs onto the Reference PLDs. This locally determined comparison will then be available for use as needed.

Reference PLDs
The Reference PLDs are organized by proficiency levels, language features, and modalities and skills. The display on the following page presents these in table format. The columns show skills (productive and receptive) and levels (low, moderate, and high). The rows show modalities (text-based and oral) and language features (discourse, phrase/sentence & word). At the nexus of skills and modalities, we can identify the four language domains: speaking (productive-oral), listening (receptive-oral), writing (productive-text-based), and reading (receptive-text-based), which are indicated by watermarks in each quadrant.

RANGE OF PERFORMANCE IN ENGLISH – descriptors reflect performance at exit stage of each level						
	PRODUCTIVE			RECEPTIVE		
	Low	Moderate	High	Low	Moderate	High
ORAL — Discourse	Engages in basic oral interactions in direct informational exchanges on familiar and routine social and academic topics	Engages comfortably in most social and academic discussions on familiar topics using extended discourse	Produces, initiates, and engages in sustained extended interactions tailored to specific purposes and audiences on a variety of social and academic topics, including new and unfamiliar topics	Understands simple or routine directions and short, simple conversations and discussions on familiar social and academic topics	Comprehends most social and academic discussions on familiar topics and follows discussions related to feelings, needs and opinions in extended discourse	Comprehends longer, elaborated directions, and extended conversations and discussions on familiar and unfamiliar topics in academic and social contexts
ORAL — Phrase/Sentence	Uses repetitive phrasal and sentence patterns with formulaic structures common across discipline areas	Uses a variety of sentence structures with varying complexity	Uses a variety of sentence structures with varied levels of complexity tailored to the communicative task	Demonstrates an understanding of repeated phrases and simply-constructed sentences	Comprehends a variety of grammatical constructions and sentence patterns common in spoken language in academic and social contexts	Comprehends a wide variety of complex and sophisticated sentence structures in varied academic and social interactions
ORAL — Word	Uses commonly used words and phrases	Uses specific and some technical content-area vocabulary and words or phrases with shades of meaning	Uses a range of abstract, specific and technical content-related vocabulary; uses a range of idiomatic expressions and words or phrases with multiple meanings	Demonstrates an understanding of words and phrases from familiar contexts and previously learned content material	Understands specific and some technical content-related vocabulary; some idiomatic expressions and words or phrases with multiple meanings	Understands a wide range of specific, technical and idiomatic words and phrases; comprehends words and phrases with multiple meanings
TEXT-BASED — Discourse	Produces basic written texts in directed tasks or activities on familiar and routine topics	Produces texts that express ideas to meet most social and academic needs	Produces texts to meet a variety of social needs and academic demands for specific purposes and audiences	Demonstrates an understanding of simple sentences in short, connected texts with visual cues, on familiar topics	Demonstrates comprehension of increasingly complex texts; identifies detailed information on unfamiliar topics with fewer contextual clues	Demonstrates comprehension of a variety of complex texts and identifies general and detailed information in texts on familiar and unfamiliar topics
TEXT-BASED — Phrase/Sentence	Produces simple sentences	Produces texts that reflect a grasp of basic grammatical structures and sentence patterns with evidence of emerging use of more complex patterns	Produces texts using a variety of grammatical structures and a broad range of sentence patterns matched to purpose	Demonstrates an understanding of basic, routinely used language structures in social and content-area texts	Demonstrates comprehension of a variety of complex grammatical constructions and sentence patterns in social and content-area texts	Demonstrates comprehension of a wide variety of complex and sophisticated sentence structures from varied social and content-area texts
TEXT-BASED — Word	Uses high frequency and commonly-learned vocabulary and phrases drawn from social contexts and content areas	Uses more varied vocabulary that extends beyond the everyday to include content-specific vocabulary, some idiomatic expressions, and words or phrases with multiple meanings	Uses a broad range of vocabulary, including abstract and technical terms; uses a broader range of idiomatic expressions and words or phrases with multiple meanings appropriate to context	Demonstrates comprehension of frequently occurring content words and phrases in social and content-area texts	Demonstrates comprehension of more varied vocabulary that extends beyond the everyday to include content-specific vocabulary; some idiomatic expressions, and words or phrases with multiple meanings	Demonstrates comprehension of a wide range of vocabulary, including abstract and technical terms; comprehends words and phrases with multiple meanings

Examples of Functional Language Use across English Proficiency Levels

Below are examples of language use in common academic tasks such as explaining, recounting, and arguing from evidence. The enactment of these tasks involves the use of specific language functions such as identify, sequence, compare, and evaluate (underlined in the examples). It is important to note that these are language functions, not cognitive functions. Students at all English proficiency levels can and need to perform all necessary cognitive functions; they simply express their thinking with different, more varied language as their language proficiency increases. In receptive skills, what changes is the amount and/or complexity of the language a student is able to process. In productive skills, students progress from using simple forms (e.g., 'good' or 'bad' to express an evaluation) to more complex and varied forms (e.g., "The second option, which satisfies all but one requirement, is preferable.") The descriptions are written to depict classroom learning contexts and convey both the use of language supports and their removal as students gain autonomy in language.

The following list provides examples of functional language use when students recount, explain, or argue. This list is not exhaustive. It merely provides examples of language used when students engage with content and disciplinary practices.

Recount, as might be observed at low, medium, and high levels of proficiency in the productive domains (speaking and writing)

> **Low:** Students can use sentence starters and graphic organizers to recount the events of a story and to <u>relate predictions</u> about future outcomes, using a series of simple sentences and <u>providing some details</u> with adjectives and common prepositional phrases.
> **Moderate:** Students can use graphic organizers to recount the events of and <u>make predictions</u> related to a story, <u>providing more precise details and more nuanced relationships between ideas</u> through greater variety in word choice and logical connectors.
> **High:** Students can recount the events in a story, <u>provide extensive details</u>, and <u>make predictions of varied degrees of certainty</u> about future outcomes in ways that are more concise, by embedding clauses and phrases within sentences.

Explanation, as might be observed at low, medium, and high levels of proficiency in the receptive domains (listening and reading)

> **Low:** When listening to/reading an illustrated explanation of how to solve two-step equations, students can <u>follow single-step directions</u> provided in short, imperative sentences.
> **Moderate:** When listening to/reading visually supported explanations of how to solve two-step equations, students can <u>follow multi-step directions</u> conveyed in short, simple sentences.
> **High:** When listening to/reading several math partners' explanations of how to solve two-step equations, students can <u>follow detailed multi-step directions</u> conveyed in a variety of simple to complex sentence types.

Explanation, as might be observed at low, medium, and high levels of proficiency in the productive domains (speaking and writing)

> **Low:** When working in a small group to explain why the identity property of multiplication is true, supported by a graphic organizer and a word bank, students can communicate in <u>short, simply-stated</u> <u>explanations of the similarities between</u> multiplication and repeated addition.

Moderate: When working in a small group and supported by a graphic organizer to explain why the identity property of multiplication is true, students can communicate in <u>longer, more detailed</u> <u>explanations of the similarities between</u> multiplication and repeated addition.

High: When working in a small group to explain why the identity property of multiplication is true, students can <u>use a variety of sentence structures</u> to communicate <u>more concise explanations of the similarities between</u> multiplication and repeated addition, and can <u>construct a more authoritative stance</u> through the <u>use of grammatical structures</u> such as <u>nominalizations</u> and the use of <u>passive voice</u>.

Argument, as might be observed at low, medium, and high levels of proficiency in the receptive domains (listening and reading)

Low: When reading a short, highlighted, grade-level paragraph supporting a hypothesis, students can <u>identify the claim and related warrants of</u> an argument when provided a word bank, graphic organizer and scaffolded reading support.

Moderate: When reading multiple, grade-level paragraphs supporting a hypothesis, students can <u>identify the claim and related warrants of</u> an argument when provided a graphic organizer and scaffolded reading support.

High: When reading multiple, grade-level paragraphs supporting a hypothesis, students can <u>identify the claim and related warrants of</u> an argument.

References

Bailey, A. & Heritage, M. (2013). The role of language learning progressions in improved instruction and assessment of English language learners**.** Unpublished manuscript. UCLA.

Linquanti, R. & Cook, H. G. (2013). *Toward a "Common Definition of English Learner": Guidance for states and state assessment consortia in defining and addressing policy and technical issues and options*. Washington, D.C.: Council of Chief State School Officers.

Appendix A.

Participants in the national working session on defining the "English proficient" performance standard
September 17, 2013, CCSSO, Washington, D.C.

Participant	Representing the following institutions/organizations*
Patricia Adkisson	State Title III Directors Association (Alaska)
Supreet Anand	US Department of Education (Observer)
Rosa Aronson	Teachers of English to Speakers of Other Languages
Alison Bailey	UCLA (Session Leader)
Tim Boals	WIDA
Karen Cadiero-Kaplan	California Department of Education
Martha Castellon	Understanding Language-Stanford University
Mariana Castro	WIDA
Magda Chia	Smarter Balanced
Fen Chou	CCSSO
Laurene Christensen	National Center and State Collaborative (NCSC)
H. Gary Cook	Wisconsin Center for Education Research (Session Facilitator)
Elizabeth Cranley	WIDA
Chane Eplin	PARCC and ELPA21 (Florida)
Thomas Falkinburg	Office of Civil Rights (Observer)
James Ferg-Cadima	Mexican-American Legal Defense and Education Fund
Shannon Glynn	CCSSO
Margo Gottlieb	WIDA
Kenji Hakuta	ELPA21 (Understanding Language-Stanford University)
Margaret Ho	ELPA21 (Washington)
David Holbrook	ASSETS (Wyoming)
Rocio Inclan	National Education Association
Angelica Infante	New York State Education Department
Yvette Jackson	PARCC
Dorry Kenyon	Center for Applied Linguistics
Audrey Lesondak	WIDA (Wisconsin)
Robert Linquanti	WestEd (Session Leader)
Giselle Lundy-Ponce	American Federation of Teachers
Rita MacDonald	Wisconsin Center for Education Research (Session Facilitator)
Emily McCarthy	Office of Civil Rights (Observer)
Luis-Gustavo Martinez	National Education Association
Martha Martinez	ELPA21 (Oregon)
Robert Measel	PARCC (Rhode Island)
Scott Norton	CCSSO
Anita Pandey	National Association of Bilingual Education
Jen Paul	Smarter Balanced

Margarita Pinkos	Palm Beach County School District
Justin Porter	Texas Education Agency
Tamara Reavis	PARCC
Lily Roberts	California Department of Education
Gail Tiemann	Dynamic Learning Maps Consortium
Gabriela Uro	Council of Great City Schools
Dan Wiener	PARCC (Massachusetts)
Lynn Shafer Willner	WestEd (ELPA 21)
Carsten Wilmes	WIDA
Santiago Wood	National Association of Bilingual Education

*May differ from participant's institution of employment.