

FAQ Series: Proficiency Level Descriptors



What are Proficiency Level Descriptors?

Proficiency Level Descriptors (PLDs) are tables that describe multilingual learners' language growth across levels of English language proficiency (PL), from PL1 to PL6. PLDs describe how multilingual learners use both interpretive and expressive language toward the end of each language proficiency level until they reach PL6.

How is Proficiency Level 6 (PL 6) represented differently in the PLDs?

PL6 is open ended; it indicates that for all of us, language development continues throughout life. Each end-of-level descriptor includes and builds on previous proficiency levels (e.g., PL4 = PL1 + PL2 + PL3 + PL4).

Why frame the continuum of language development as Proficiency Level Descriptors?

For ease of representation and understanding, the PLDs describe proficiency in a linear way. However, language development is not a straightforward progression across proficiency levels, and the way in which individual students develop language depends on a variety of factors, including their familiarity with the topic, audience, and situation.

Therefore, multilingual learners may take various paths to develop and reach Language Expectations. At any given point in their language development, multilingual learners may demonstrate a range of abilities within and across each proficiency level. For example, they may speak at a higher proficiency level, while writing at an earlier proficiency level. A proficiency level does not categorize a multilingual learner (e.g., "a PL1 student"), but, rather, identifies snapshots of what a multilingual learner knows and can do at a particular stage of language development (e.g., "a student at PL1" or "a student whose listening performance is at PL1").

How are Proficiency Level Descriptors (2020) different from K-12 Performance Definitions (2012)?

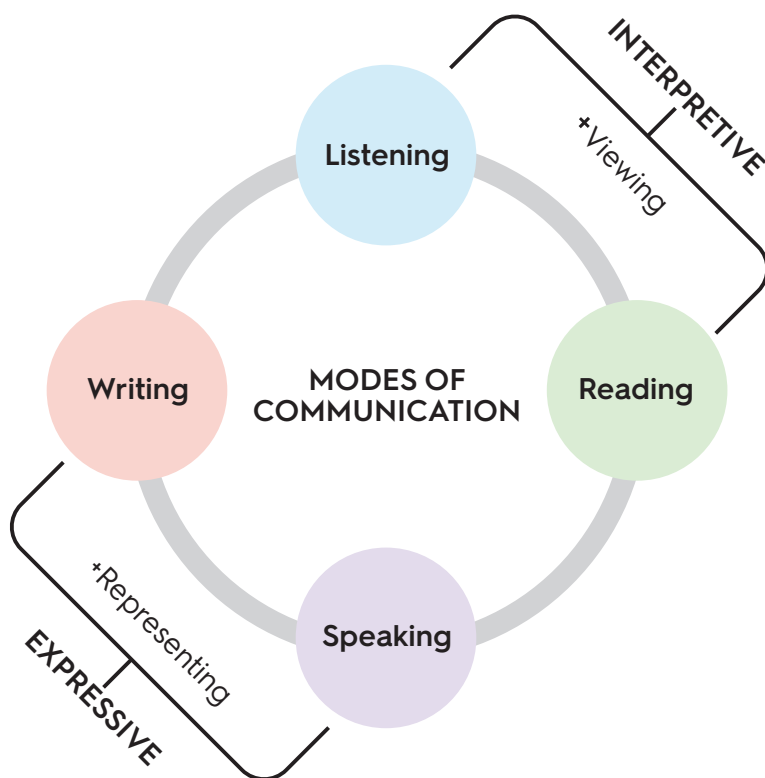
The PLDs speak to educators' requests for more detailed descriptions of what multilingual learners' language development looks like across each grade-level cluster, rather than the single K-12 continuum of development presented by the 2012 Performance Definitions in the 2012 Amplification of the WIDA ELD Standards.

What are the Dimensions of Language used to explicate the Proficiency Level Descriptors?

Maintaining consistency with the K-12 Performance Definitions, PLDs continue to be written according to the three dimensions of language use: discourse, sentence, and word/phrase.

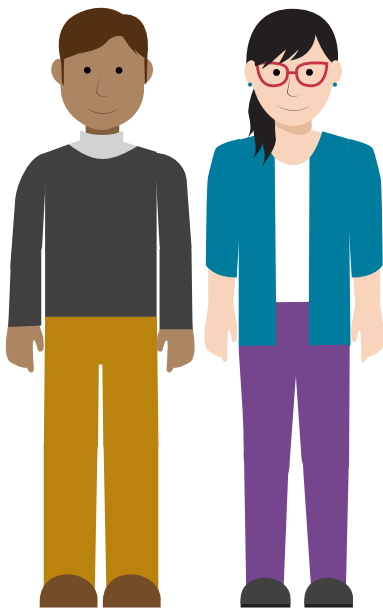
Why are Proficiency Level Descriptors organized by Interpretive and Expressive communication modes?

As part of the 2020 Edition's mission to increase accessibility options for students and emphasize multimodal forms of communication, PLDs are articulated in two expanded communication modes: interpretive (listening, reading, and viewing) and expressive (speaking, writing, and representing). These communication modes highlight that students communicate through listening, speaking, reading, and writing, but they also communicate through gestures, facial expressions, images, equations, maps, symbols, and other means. Multimodal communication does not only provide support for developing language, but rather is an essential path for all students to make meaning. This move to use interpretive and expressive communication modes is further intended to remind educators that students must be offered multiple means to engage, interpret, represent, act, and express their ideas in the classroom.



How can the Proficiency Level Descriptors be used to scaffold during unit lesson planning?

PLDs serve as a guide for describing typical patterns of language development, and demonstrate how the language development of individuals may grow over time to the next level of language complexity. The PLDs supply clear targets for language learning that educators can integrate into their curriculum planning for students of all ages and stages of language development. This in turn can inform the choice of appropriate scaffolds as educators consider the ways in which students may use language to meet the Language Expectations of a unit, and plan for how to assist them in applying increasingly precise and complex language to meet those expectations. Educators should scaffold learning and resources across all levels of language proficiency.



Where can I learn more about Proficiency Level Descriptors?



Section 2 introduces the Proficiency Level Descriptors. Section 3 helps educators put the WIDA ELD Standards Framework into action and contains more detail about the Proficiency Level Descriptors for each grade-level cluster. Appendix D contains a compilation of Proficiency Level Descriptors at all grade-level clusters, with additional technical notes.