

Connecting to the Montgomery County, Maryland Adult ESOL System: Understanding and Using Adult ESOL Proficiency Level Descriptors

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By Lynda Terrill in collaboration with MCAEL staff

The Montgomery Coalition for Adult English Literacy (MCAEL) and Montgomery County adult ESOL programs have an interest in:

- a) accurately understanding and being able to articulate the adult ESOL proficiency levels of learners in the programs in order to provide appropriate and effective instruction and
- b) understanding when and how to help learners transition to other programs within the county.

Related to these basic concerns MCAEL identified through a transitions workgroup that one of the barriers to a fully functional system was the variety of descriptors various programs used to identify their program class levels. Without a consistent framework, learners and program staff found it difficult to understand what the next best program or step in the learner's language-learning process would be. Although a general framework exists through the national and state rubrics [namely the Student Performance Levels (SPLs), National Reporting System (NRS), and the Maryland Adult ESL/ESOL Content Standards], MCAEL understands that this framework is not being used effectively by all programs for various reasons.

In order to provide a system that staff, instructors and learners can use, MCAEL, using the national and state rubrics has begun to work with providers to identify how the programs' classes correspond to the levels. The following tools provide information to assist in understanding and using the levels.

This document provides a brief history of adult ESOL descriptors, and refers to a set of two-page documents, one for each of six levels, that provide: a summary of descriptors, a program worksheet that may help programs "translate" federal and state descriptors to the local level, and a tip sheet for programs about how to understand the English proficiency levels and life needs and goals of learners with whom they work.

History of Adult ESOL Descriptors

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 in the Philippines or Thailand, along with 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 (speaking), 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 ESOL 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. Reading and writing SPLs were reviewed and updated in 2003.

While some programs that served refugees continued to understand and use SPLs, many others were not aware of them until the Workforce Investment Act (WIA) of 1998 (H.R. 1385, Pub. L. No. 105-220) was enacted. Title II, also known as the Adult Education and Family Literacy Act (AEFLA) required adult education agencies to establish core indicators of program quality and of learner performance related to educational gain, placement and retention in employment, participation in postsecondary education or training, and high school completion. From this legislation (and previous work by stakeholders at the program, state, and national level) the National Reporting System (NRS) www.nrsweb.org/ was developed. The SPL document was one of the sets of proficiency descriptors that informed the development of the NRS levels. [Now, SPLS are used as benchmarks that help define the NRS levels.]

The NRS describes adult English language proficiency in three general categories: listening and speaking, basic reading and writing, and functional and workplace skills at six levels:

<i>Beginning ESL Literacy</i>	<i>Low Beginning ESL</i>	<i>High Beginning ESL</i>
<i>Low Intermediate ESL</i>	<i>High Intermediate ESL</i>	<i>Advanced ESL</i>

Adult ESL* programs that are funded with state-administered, U.S. Department of Education monies are required to report learners' progress—using NRS benchmarks—to their state departments of education, which in turn report to the Federal government. To receive funding, states are required to show percentages of progress at the six levels.

Other sets of descriptors that relate to adult second language or adult English language learning include the Canadian Benchmarks (at www.language.ca/) and The Council of Europe's *Common European Framework of Reference for Languages: Learning, Teaching, Assessment (CEFR)* at (www.coe.int/t/dg4/linguistic/cadre_en.asp). While these documents are not often referred to at the local level, these and other documents helped inform current policy.

Conclusion

Having available a set (or sets) of descriptors or benchmarks is important, so all stakeholders—learners, teachers, administrators, funders, government officials, and the community at large—can have a general measure of progress. It's important to emphasize that descriptors are generalized statements that help to provide a framework for programs and instructors.

These descriptors can't fully explain the level and progress of an individual or a single class. This is especially true because individuals do not progress in the four skills (speaking, reading, writing, listening) at the same pace. For example, a learner may progress quickly in speaking and listening, progress somewhat more slowly in reading, and take a much longer time to learn how to write. To get a more complete picture of each learner or class, teachers and program administrators need to conduct and use data from class needs assessment and learner short-term goal-setting along with ongoing in-class (teacher, self, and peer) assessment and evaluation activities.

Even so, understanding and using the levels and descriptors can assist a program in assessing individuals coming into the programs or transitioning between classes or programs and in creating a more easily efficient and user-friendly system for learners in Montgomery County.

* The National Reporting System and other Federal documents use the term *ESL* (English as a second language), some states and other entities use the term *ESOL* (English to speakers of other languages), and, in the last decade, some entities have used *English literacy* as terms to describe immigrant English language learners and programs.

NRS Descriptors, MCAEL Descriptors, and Program Administrators' Descriptor Worksheet

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The goal of the following exercise is to help program administrators understand who the learners in their program are, what types of instruction and resources might be most useful to them, and to situate their programs on a local—Montgomery County—continuum of service. This is so staff members can appropriately place learners in classes coming into their programs and assist them when it may be time to transition learners to different adult ESOL programs in the county. On the grids below:

1. The **first column** provides a summary of each of the six educational functioning levels (EFLs) of the National Reporting System (NRS).
2. The **second column** (MCAEL Descriptors) gives a more detailed explanation and description of learners at this level with:
 - general tips
 - advice on instruction
 - effective materials for learners at this level
 - cultural and demographic notes
 - background resources
 - when a learner at this level may be ready to go the next level.
3. The **third column** presents a series of questions for program administrators to answer in order to help them place learners at the appropriate level. The result of using this exercise is that program should be able to note:
 "In our program during ____ (fiscal year), we support _____adult ESOL classes with a total of approximately _____students. In our program we believe we serve the following proficiency level(s): _____."

Summary of NRS Levels	MCAEL Descriptors	Program Levels Exercises:	Page #
NRS levels are an average of learners' proficiencies at entry-level ; they describe listening and speaking, basic reading and writing, and functional and workplace skills through six levels of performance	MCAEL descriptors give information, examples & offer advice to fill in the general descriptors of the NRS.*	This space is for program administrators to analyze the English language proficiency levels of the learners in their own programs with NRS & MCAEL descriptors.	
Beginning ESL Literacy	Beginning ESL Literacy		
Low Beginning ESL	Low Beginning ESL		
High Beginning ESL	High Beginning ESL		
Low Intermediate ESL	Low Intermediate ESL		
High Intermediate ESL	High Intermediate ESL		
Advanced ESL	Advanced ESL		