United Nations

UN WORKING LANGUAGE
PROFICIENCY.

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UN Working Language Proficiency

Definition of the Working Language Proficiency in UN Official Languages

1. Introduction

1.1 Organizational Background

The first definition of the "working level" of language proficiency in the Organization was established in 1956 by ST/AI/113 on Linguistic standards for staff of the United Nations Secretariat. The purpose of this Administrative Instruction was "to explain to what extent staff members are expected to learn languages other than their own and to remove doubts as to the standards which may be prescribed for them by reviewing bodies". The document distinguished three levels of linguistic knowledge: "a really advanced knowledge", "a working knowledge" and "a slighter knowledge", establishing the "working knowledge" as the level "which the examination for the language allowance and the language diploma aims to establish". The working knowledge was defined at that time as

> *"A working knowledge, sufficient to permit a speaker to take part in ordinary conversations, to attend meetings, understand what is said there and to make his own contribution, to write about official matters from one office to another within the Organization, in a language which, while not necessarily perfect, avoids the grosser grammatical and syntactical errors and is readily comprehensible".*

However, these linguistic standards for UN staff have not been reiterated in ST/AI/1999/2 on Language proficiency and language incentives which, inter alia, abolished the old ST/AI/113 in 1999.

The lack of a precise and detailed definition of what is expected from UN employees when using an official language at work, has brought some inconsistencies in the teaching and assessment of the six official languages in the Organization.

1.2 Scope and purpose of this document

The present document contains an updated description of the level of language proficiency that any staff member of the United Nations Secretariat is expected to demonstrate when using an official language to carry out generic or ordinary duties (UN Working Language Proficiency). The main purposes of this description are:

- **To facilitate the assessment of the working language proficiency of staff members.** The description of the UN Working Language Proficiency may be used to revise the evaluation criteria, structure and contents of Language Proficiency Exams (LPE) in the six languages, not only improving their reliability and validity but also the consistency and equal treatment in the assessment of all languages.

- **To guide the description and assessment of other levels of language competence, both above and below the working language proficiency.**

The resulting expanded scale of level descriptions will be a UN Language Reference Framework that will provide the Organization with:

○ a common curriculum in the six official languages for all language learning programmes across the United Nations Secretariat. This will help staff members to plan their learning itinerary to acquire the desired level of communicative competence, and to monitor their progress.
○ a reference from which to develop other assessment tools for career development and for recruitment processes in the Organization (e.g. computerized pre-screening language tests).

The ultimate purpose of this document is to harmonize the teaching, learning and assessment of the six official languages in the Secretariat, in accordance with the broad mandate on multilingualism that has been disseminated in a number of resolutions by the General Assembly[1] and, in particular, with the responsibility of the Secretariat to mainstream multilingualism into the work of all its entities.

2. Working Level Proficiency (WLP)

2.1 Theoretical background and sources

Since the 1950s, in the aftermath of World War II and the Korean War, theorists, researchers and language professionals around the world have been very active in trying to describe what it means to learn and use languages and how language can be operationalized and sequenced for learning, for teaching and for assessment purposes.

It is impossible to acknowledge the huge number of authors who have influenced the way language teaching, language learning and language assessment are understood today. However, the work on curriculum design (Stenhouse 1975), on language description (Canale and Swain 1980), on methodological approaches (Wilkins, 1976, Nunan 1988) on second language acquisition research (Ellis 1990) and – profusely since the 1990s - on language testing and assessment (Bachman 1990, Alderson 1995, Weir 1998, Bachman and Palmer 1996 and 2010) needs to be highlighted.

Moreover, credit needs to be given as well to the work done along similar lines by governmental institutions, such as the Interagency Language Roundtable (IRL), American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages (ACTFL) in the USA (http://www.govtilr.org/, http://www.actfl.org), the Center for Canadian Benchmarks in Canada

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[1] A/RES/69/324 (2015), A/RES/67/292 (2013), A/RES/65/311 (2011), A/RES/63/306 (2009), A/RES/61/266 (2006), A/RES/59/309 (2004), A/RES/56/262 (2002), A/RES/54/64 (2000), A/RES/52/23 (1997), A/RES/50/11 (1995).

(http://www.language.ca/), and the Council of Europe (http://www.coe.int. These entities expanded on the research and publications cited above and produced new guidelines and benchmarks for language teaching and assessment (ACTFL Guidelines in 1999/2001; Canadian Benchmarks in 2000; and the Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR) in 2001). More recently, both ACTFL and The Center for the Canadian Benchmarks have published updates of their work (see References), and the Council of Europe is currently piloting a substantial supplement to the CEFR, with particular focus on the development of scales for mediation[2].

The WLP defined in this document draws on the works and references cited above and also on different UN references related to the assessment of language proficiency in the Organization. As mentioned in the introduction, the United Nations Secretariat has also shown interest in describing linguistic standards for its own staff, and a first definition of the "working knowledge" was included in ST/AI/113 (1956).

Other source materials considered in the current definition of the WLP include an analysis of the contents of the existing UN Language Proficiency Exams (LPE); the results of two surveys conducted by the UN Language Programmes in 2009 and 2010 to identify both the needs and the uses of the official languages in the Organization; a Functional Definition of Language Proficiency Levels drafted by the Consultative Committee on Administrative Questions in 1979; and an Information Circular on language allowance issued in 1951 (ST/AFS/SER.A/93) containing a description of "the linguistic knowledge which entitles staff members to the allowance".
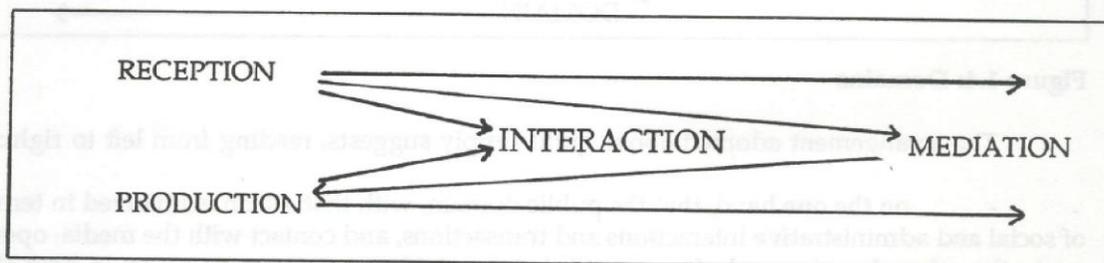
2.2 Operationalization: language model adopted

The language model adopted in the definition and description of the WLP draws on the literature mentioned in the Theoretical Justification (Bachman and Palmer 1996 and 2010 and Celce-Murcia and Dornyei 1995, see References at the end of the document) and on the work by the Canadian Benchmarks Centre (2015) and the Council of Europe (CEFR 2001, Extended set of Descriptors 2017).
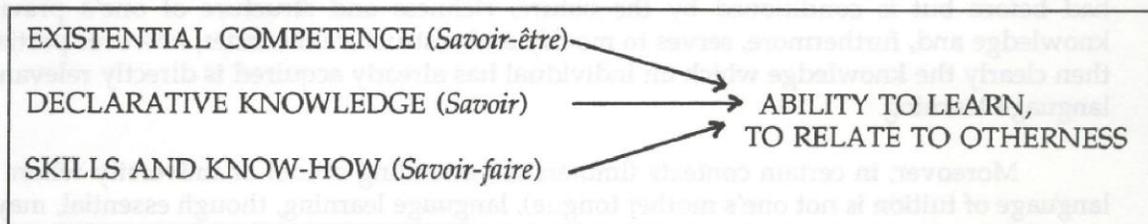
Three main considerations have informed the WLP definition and description:

> **1. The action-oriented nature of human communication**, where interaction, that is, alternating production and reception activities, is central, and where mediation language activities occupy an important place in the normal linguistic functioning of our societies. The following diagram (Council of Europe, 1995, Figure 1.3.) illustrates this approach.

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[2] Mediation is a linguistic activity in which an oral or written text is reformulated to ensure that the meaning is transferred appropriately to third parties. Mediation can occur within the same language (register changes, grades of specialization) or between languages (rephrasing or summarizing). Mediation is an integral part of communication in contexts such as the UN, where interlocutors come from different language and/or cultural backgrounds or have different levels of language proficiency.

2. The role of language users both as individuals and as social agents, who activate their general competences to carry out language communication activities. The general competences of language users consist of three components, which in turn contribute to the ability to learn and to relate to otherness: the knowledge resulting from experience or from formal learning (savoir); the skills and know-how in carrying out procedures (savoir-faire); and the existential competence (savoir-être) comprising the sum of individual characteristics, personality traits and attitudes. The following diagram describes graphically the components of the general competences of an individual which shape the use of language(s) (Council of Europe, 1995, Figure 1.1.).
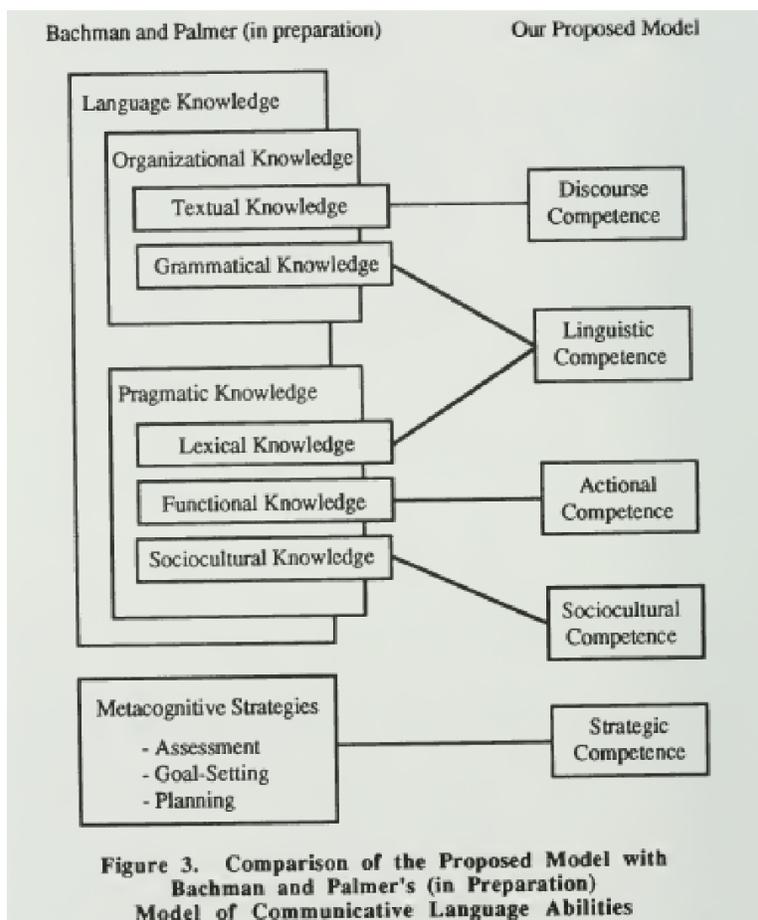

3. The several components comprised in communicative language competence, namely linguistic, sociolinguistic/sociocultural and pragmatic, with the incorporation of strategic competence to help gear the dynamic nature of communication.
These components are organized or labelled differently by different authors. While the CEFR (2001) talks about the three components already mentioned, i.e. linguistic, sociolinguistic and pragmatic, some authors (Bachman 1990, Bachman 1996 and 2010) talk about two categories only, linguistic and pragmatic (which comprises sociocultural competence/ knowledge). Others (Celce-Murcia et al 1995) organize communicative language competence into sub-competences directly (discourse, linguistic, actional, sociocultural, strategic).
As for differences in terminology, Bachman 1990 and Celce-Murcia et al talk about "language competence and strategic competence", whereas Bachman 2006 and 2010 talk about "language knowledge and strategic knowledge"; likewise, Bachman 1990, Bachman and Palmer 2006 and 2010 talk about "textual knowledge or competence", whereas Celce-Murcia et al talk about "discourse competence".

The graph below (Celce-Murcia et al 1995: 12) illustrates how communicative language competence is operationalized differently by different authors. The Bachman and Palmer

"in preparation" model corresponds to the publication in 1996, whereas "our model" refers to Celce-Murcia et al 1995).

Figure 3. Comparison of the Proposed Model with Bachman and Palmer's (in Preparation) Model of Communicative Language Abilities

Informed by these various models, (see Centre for the Canadian Language Benchmarks 2015 for a good overview and summary of references), the communicative language model adopted in the WLP considers , on the one hand, the abilities involved in controlling the structure of language for production and reception, and in its ordering to form texts (how language is formed) and, on the other, the abilities to use language in communication, taking into consideration context and purpose of communication (how language is used).

2.3 Concept of multilingualism

The UN Working Language Proficiency (WLP) drafted in the following pages describes the language competence level that any UN staff member should be able to demonstrate in any of the six official languages in generic work-related duties and activities. Focus has been placed on language proficiency and on language use by adults, both socially and in the workplace, and in a context where multilingualism is key for the Organization to achieve its goals of promoting international peace and security, development and human rights.

As stated in par. 1.2 above, the General Assembly has consistently underlined the importance of staff members showing knowledge and ability in languages other than their mother tongue to bear witness to the importance of communication across the boundaries of culture, nationality and language. In a multilingual and multicultural world, individuals with both multilingual and multicultural competence(s) are central to making international cooperation possible. UN staff members need to be able to function in different languages at different levels of competence, using both their multilingual and multicultural repertoire as a means to succeed in intercultural communication.

It is worth mentioning that this concept of multilingualism is related to the ability of an individual to use several languages at different levels of proficiency, assuming a mutual interaction of languages in the mind of the user, as well as the bulk of linguistic and cultural experience of this person which add to his/her communicative competence.

This understanding of multilingualism is aligned to the notion of "plurilingualism" promoted by the Council of Europe since it first published in its Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) in 2001. The CEFR gives particular importance to the development of a plurilingual competence in individuals that is made up of different languages and language varieties at different levels of proficiency and includes different types of competences. Also, plurilingual competence is dynamic and changes in its composition throughout an individual's life. The use and development of an individual's plurilingual competence is possible because different languages are not learned in isolation and can influence each other both in the learning process and communicative use.

3. Working Language Proficiency (WLP) Definition

3.1 General considerations on WLP Level Descriptors

The WLP Level Descriptors have been drafted to match the traditional division of reception (reading and listening skills) and production (speaking and writing skills) for the sake of easy reference and use, but the WLP Level Descriptors include links across these traditional four "skills", illustrating the relationships between different linguistic activities involving reception, production, interaction or mediation to texts in oral or written form. Special attention needs to be paid to how the WLP incorporates mediation[3], following the growing research and literature in the conceptualization of this linguistic activity in the 21st century.

The overall and the four specific WLP Descriptors consider the UN language user as a social agent who, as a speaker of more than one language, may need to exploit his/her multilingual and multicultural competence(s) in collaborative interactions (clarify situations or expected outcomes, take decisions) or to perform tasks and duties within the Organization. It may well be the case that in performing a reception or production activity in one language (e.g. reacting to

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[3] See note 2 above.

a written or oral communication, relaying information,…), the use of another language is deemed necessary.

Following research on descriptor drafting, attention has been paid to writing parallel competence standards across the different linguistic activities in the four Descriptors, defining the action to be done, the quality of the action (how well), the actual texts accessed and the scripts and performances produced (text types), and the conditions or limitations of the action.

3.2 Overall Descriptor

Use the language efficiently and with sufficient precision within the Organization, in a variety of contexts and situations, formal and informal, on personal, public and work-related topics and matters.
Show an appropriate command of social language conventions. In multilingual contexts, show the ability to use a variety of linguistic and cultural competences to facilitate successful communication and collaboration.

3.3 WLP Specific Descriptors

Reception activities: reading
Understand thoroughly the general meaning and identify essential information, the most relevant details and the attitudes and viewpoints expressed– both implicit and explicit- in most complex written texts (paper based or digital format), of different genres and of different lengths, on general or work-related topics and matters, at different levels of formality (e.g. reports, news articles, press releases, web announces and articles, regulations, minutes, memos, correspondence…).
Use -whenever needed- reference resources to confirm and refine interpretation. Correctly understand if any action or response is required.

Reception activities: listening
Understand the general meaning and identify essential information, the most relevant details and the attitudes and viewpoints expressed – both implicit and explicit – in oral texts on general or work related topics and matters, at different levels of formality, face-to-face, broadcast, on the phone or via digital media (one-on-one or in small groups) delivered clearly at a standard rate, in the spoken standard, and in moderately demanding contexts or reasonably noisy backgrounds (e.g. news items, short videos, presentations, documentaries, meetings, conferences, debates…).
Use -whenever needed- reference resources to confirm and refine interpretation. Correctly understand if any action or response is required.

Spoken Production and Interaction

Produce clear and well-structured oral texts (presentations, speeches, answers or explanations, instructions) with adequate detail, face-to-face or distant (phone, online), on general or work-related topics.

Take part in a variety of interactions (everyday conversations, phone calls, planned or impromptu meetings, interviews, appraisals), face-to-face or distant , at various levels of formality, on general or work-related matters, making statements, arguing personal opinions and reacting in a socio- linguistically appropriate way and with sensitivity to different viewpoints.

Relay or summarize adequately the main information contained in an oral or written communication.

Use-whenever needed- reference resources to aid and support communication.

Written Production and Interaction

Write clear and well organized texts (paper-based or digital) in different genres on a series of general and work-related topics and matters (e.g. reports, newsletters, general reports, resumés, talking points or meeting agendas, minutes, e-mail correspondence …), using appropriately a moderate range of linguistic resources. In written exchanges, react adequately matching efficiently register and style to the communicative situation.

Take notes on and summarize the main information contained in an oral communication or in a written document.

Relay adequately the main information contained in an oral or written communication.

Use – whenever needed - reference resources to improve and refine writing.

4. References

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