An Overview of the ILR Skill Level Descriptors
for Proficiency Test Development and Evaluation

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American Councils for International Education

May 2014
Annual Flagship Meeting - UCLA
Los Angeles, California
A Brief History of the ILR Scale

1950s - Initial ideas out of a need to assess foreign language capabilities of government employees-mainly those at the Foreign Service Institute
• focus on the general use of language in work and professional setting

1968 - Creation of the ILR Speaking Guidelines
• with other skills following
• focus on communicative competence

1974 - NATO created the STANAG 6001 Scale based on the ILR Scale
• focus on interoperability among the NATO nations using English as FL

1975- Text Typology and Passage Rating Introduced
• focus on using *authentic in-language* materials

1980s - ACTFL Proficiency Scale was created based on the ILR Scale
• focus on academic settings and lower level skill granularity-incl. K-12
A Brief History

1985 - Plus Level descriptions introduced as “supplement to the base levels”
  • focus on capturing the high end of the range

2001 - The ILR Scale was used extensively to develop a large number of foreign language proficiency tests
  • focus on the upper end of the scale in LCTLs

2002-2012 - Efforts underway to bring the scale up to the current technologies, variety of use, and needs of the USG community with discussions and summits to supplement, enhance, and possibly revise the ILR

2012 - The ILR Intercultural Competence Guidelines were created and introduced with focus on language use
Today

2013/2014 – The ILR Self-Assessment Guidelines, the result of a multi-agency collaboration, are created and posted at the ILR website.

The ILR is the main assessment scale for most government agencies for testing foreign language proficiency.

The ILR is used in Flagship assessment projects and assessment tools.

The ILR guidelines are used through different approaches and formats to best meet the needs of a specific agency.
Main Principles of the ILR System

1- The Functionality Principle. The construct is based on the functional linguistic abilities of a language user who is not a native speaker of the language.

2- The Mastery Principle. A user performing at a level most of the time and sustaining performance at the level is considered to be proficient at that level, by fulfilling the “mastery principle”.

3- The Range Principle. Each level contains a range of profiles that may vary from one another in terms of quantitative and qualitative accuracy. It is possible to see different degrees of performances within the level.

4- The Threshold Principle. The descriptions of the ILR scale define minimally required skills and abilities that have to be sustained at the threshold level. There is NO room below except dropping to the next level below.

5- The Subsumption Principle. Each ILR level subsumes every level below in terms of fulfilling the tasks required at those levels.
Text Modes

ORIENTATION MODE (L1)

INSTRUCTIVE MODE (L2)

EVALUATIVE MODE (L3)

PROJECTIVE MODE (L4)
**QUESTION: HOW TO MANAGE THE LANGUAGE OUTSIDE THE ILR DOMAINS?**

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<tr>
<th>Philosophy</th>
<th>Literature</th>
<th>Slang Converging Paradigms</th>
<th>Drama Metaphysics High Level Abstraction</th>
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<td>Pragmatic use of Language Work-related Life Family Events</td>
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<td><strong>LEVEL 2</strong></td>
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<td>Frequent Daily chores Personal Immediate surroundings</td>
<td><strong>ORIENTATIONAL on Basic Information</strong></td>
<td><strong>LEVEL 1</strong></td>
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THE THREE COMPONENTS OF THE ILR LEVEL STRUCTURE

CONTENT & CONTEXT

LEVEL

TASK

ACCURACY REQUIREMENTS
Main Principles of the ILR - The Three Components

TASK – ACCURACY – CONTENT & CONTEXT

Full Plane Evaluation:
Each and Every description in the ILR scale must be evaluated against all three planes required for that level every time & all the time.

Continuum of performances:
Linguistic performances appear in a continuum both within a range and across the scale... where different levels of language properties may appear in a mixed fashion.

Sustainment:
Thresholds are the transition points within the linguistic continuum... where a new gestalt clearly appears and holds...the performance remains sustained at the required level (~70% and above sustainment=mastery criterion).

Like watching Michelle Kwan perform on the ice...
Plus Level:

User exceeds the base level requirements significantly AND meets most BUT NOT all of the performance required (fails the mastery criterion!)

Example: A L3 task is given with a L3 topic. The user performs the task however at an accuracy level is less than required for sustainment.

User is able to show “developing proficiency “at that level (40-60% sustainment).
Interpreting & Using the ILR System

The ILR is a task/function driven living document, despite the decades of use, to better interpret we may have to implement:

*Cross-walking:
Looking across different skill modalities for “matching elements, features, profiles...or some evidence” to determine the levels
Remember...*the user has just one language*!

*Stair climbing:
Looking for evidence of performances at the level above or below the targeted level for triangulation
Sometimes understanding L3 helps to resolve a L2/2+ issue
Text Modes

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<td><strong>EVALUATIVE</strong></td>
<td><strong>PROJECTIVE</strong></td>
<td><strong>PHILOSOPHY</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>Basic Information</td>
<td>Events</td>
<td>Issues</td>
<td>Concepts &amp; Values</td>
<td>Literature, Pragmatic use of Language</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Frequent</strong></td>
<td><strong>Facts, Reports, News</strong></td>
<td><strong>Editorials, Opinions, Hypothesis</strong></td>
<td><strong>Irony</strong></td>
<td><strong>Philosophy, Cross-disciplinary</strong></td>
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<td><strong>Work-related</strong></td>
<td><strong>Contrast</strong></td>
<td><strong>PROJECT</strong></td>
<td><strong>Converging Paradigms</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Personal</strong></td>
<td><strong>Life</strong></td>
<td><strong>Commentary</strong></td>
<td><strong>REGIONALISM</strong></td>
<td><strong>Regionalism</strong></td>
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<td><strong>Immediate surroundings</strong></td>
<td><strong>Family Events</strong></td>
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- Cross-disciplinary
- High Level
- Colloquialisms
- Literature
- Slang
- Regionalism
- Converging Paradigms
- Drama
- Metaphysics
- High Level
- Abstraction
- Cultural References
- Poetry
- Sarcasm
- Rhetorical devices
- Discussion
- Compare
- Argument
- Defend
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- Hypothesis
- Contrast
- Commentary
- Analysis
- Facts, Reports, News
- Work-related
- Life
- Family Events
- **Literature, Slang**
- **Pragmatic use of Language**
- **LEVEL 5**
- **LEVEL 4**
- **LEVEL 3**
- **LEVEL 2**
- **LEVEL 1**

- **Synthesize**
- **Represent**
- **Use of Semiotics**
- **Metaphors**
- **LEVEL 5**
- **LEVEL 4**
- **LEVEL 3**
- **LEVEL 2**
- **LEVEL 1**
INSTRUCTIVE MODE
(ILR LEVEL 2)

Purpose: Understand detailed and factual information about events that happen in life, including:

self
family
workplace
region
country
world
GLOBAL TASKS AT LEVEL 2 TEXTS

Understanding ....

* Factual Information (beyond concrete)
* Main Players (Who – What – Where – When) stated through complex yet factual statements
* Sequencing of Events (Multiple Time Frames)
* Interaction Among Players (Direction/Relationship)
* Cause/Effect Relationship (Why)
* Conditional and Negations (If/Unless...)
* Stated Factual Outcomes and Results *
* Topic specific vocabulary

In texts that convey factual information
EVALUATIVE MODE
(ILR LEVEL 3)

Language user understands language created with the purpose of evaluating societal issues through the use of

- abstract linguistic formulations
- opinion with detailed supporting facts
- inference, hypothesis, analysis, evaluation
- beyond-surface cultural references
- Ideas presented “between the lines”

with the expectancy of considerable amount of schematic socio-cultural knowledge of the user
TASKS AT ILR LEVEL 3

UNDERSTANDS...

* EVALUATIVE STATEMENTS
* OPINION / EDITORIAL PIECES
* SOCIAL/CULTURAL/POLITICAL ISSUES
* AUTHOR PRESENT BY PERSONAL VIEWS
* USE OF ABSTRACT AND SOME CONCRETE LEXICON
* ABSTRACT LINGUISTIC FORMULATIONS USED TO CREATE COMPLEX SENTENCE AND PARAGRAPHS
* FULLY EXTENDED DISCOURSE
* DOMAIN SPECIFIC VOCABULARY (FINANCE, TRADE, INVESTMENT POLICIES ETC.)
* SCIENTIFIC OR TECHNICAL DOCUMENTS
PROJECTIVE MODE
ILR Levels 4 and 5

* Unpredictable turns of thought
* Creative mixture of register use
* All “measures” of lexical properties
• Sophisticated subtlety and nuance
• Interpret language projected uniquely
* Highly organized, abstract linguistic formulations
* Well disguised tone, inference, irony & humor
* Infrequent and abstract rhetorical devices
PROJECTIVE MODE
ILR Levels 4 and 5

* Infrequent and abstract rhetorical devices
* Allusions, metaphors, semiotics
* Controversial concepts and value-driven topics
* Cross-disciplinary approaches
* Understand “beyond the line”
* “The whole regalia”
In conclusion...

The ILR scale is a “living scale” – managed to last due to its functional construct

ILR can be used as a scale, system, or a framework

Testing is a product while learning is a process

The ILR scale is highly beneficial to teachers, learners, curriculum developers - understanding the scale and the level requirements helps focusing on the tasks and topics...
In conclusion...

Using the scale requires understanding the holistic interrelationship among the levels and the components of the scale.

It expects an appreciation for language use, its functional value, and the connection between language and culture.
Thank you....

For questions, please contact
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The ideas presented here reflect the presenter’s personal views and do not necessarily reflect or bind the American Councils for International Education.