



United Nations Language Framework



UN Levels of Language Competence
Harmonization of Language Learning and Assessment

Harmonization of Language Learning and Assessment throughout the UN Secretariat



In 2018, the Secretary-General honoured “Harmonization of Language Learning and Assessment throughout the UN Secretariat” with a UN Secretary-General Award in the category Multilingualism. It was awarded to both the Language Training Programme (LTP) at the UN Office of Geneva and the Language and Communications Programme (LCP) at UNHQ, New York.

Creating a common UN Language Framework for language learning and assessment, the framework was honoured for its ability to allow for more efficient management of language programmes by using a common curriculum for all language learning programmes across the Secretariat, and for offering a reference from which to develop other assessment tools for career development and recruitment processes, wider recognition of language skills, and smoother transitions in career mobility and development.

Introduction

With the vision of promoting multilingualism in the United Nations system, the mission of the Language Harmonization Project is to create a common United Nations Language Framework¹ for language learning and assessment, equally valid for the six UN official languages. One of the main components of this Framework is the definition of four levels of language competence, specifically in the context of the United Nations.

The Framework and UN Levels aim to build consistency among all United Nations language programmes while also remaining flexible and adaptable to local realities. The adoption of this Framework will allow for more efficient management of language programmes, stronger recognition of language skills, and smoother transitions in career mobility and development.

¹ The UN Language Framework draws on the work of governmental institutions, in particular the American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages, the Center for Canadian Benchmarks and the Council of Europe (ACTFL Guidelines, Canadian Benchmarks, Common European Framework of Reference CEFR).

About the guide

This guide aims to help users to better understand the UN Levels, which build upon each other. Each UN Level is defined by one overall and four specific descriptors that can be read as a whole. Users may also want to read the overall descriptors first, and then the specific ones, or they may choose to read how one specific descriptor changes through the UN Levels.

The guide contains:

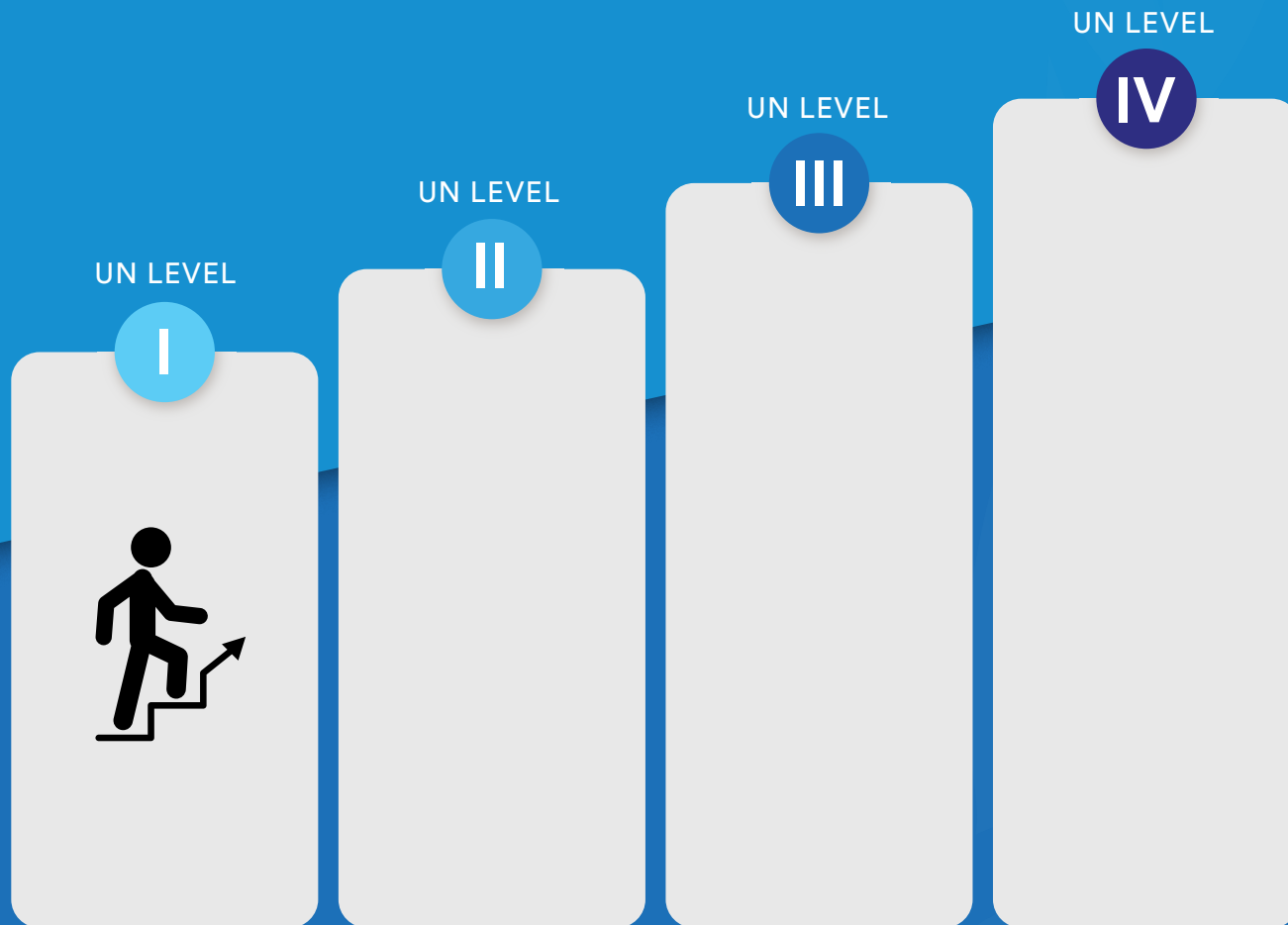
- an overview of the four language levels
- overall descriptors for the four language levels
- specific descriptors for the four skill areas:
Listening, Reading, Spoken Production and Interaction,
Written Production and Interaction
- a glossary of the terms used in the descriptors

Although other interpretations and definitions may exist for these terms, please bear in mind that readers should understand them as they are defined in the [glossary](#), which explains how the terms are used specifically in the context of these descriptors.

Please note that additional documentation and concrete examples will be available to any interested parties. In this respect, readers are invited to regularly consult the [HR Portal](#).

UN Levels of Language Competence

At every level of language competence, UN staff members are expected to function as social agents in a variety of multilingual and multicultural contexts and, as such, use existing plurilingual and pluricultural competences to further develop their linguistic and cultural repertoire(s), and to facilitate and promote successful communication and cooperation throughout the Organization.



Overall descriptors per UN Level of Language Competence

UN LEVEL

I

- Use the language in a simple manner, in non-demanding everyday contexts and situations, when dealing with routine or predictable matters in the personal, public and professional domains, throughout the Organization.
- Show basic linguistic competence and use a restricted range of social language conventions to meet simple communication needs.
- Show limited facility in understanding if an action or response is required and some autonomy to respond.
- Usually require reference resources and models, templates or external help to prepare in advance, check understanding or repair communication.

UN LEVEL

II

- Use the language with moderate fluency and accuracy, in everyday contexts and situations, when dealing with ordinary or general matters in the personal, public and professional domains, throughout the Organization.
- Show an appropriate command of a moderate range of linguistic and pragmatic competences and of social language conventions to meet ordinary general communication needs.
- Understand if any action or response is required and show adequate autonomy to respond.
- Often require reference resources and models or external help to prepare in advance, check understanding and improve or support communication.

UN LEVEL

III

- Use the language efficiently, with a high degree of fluency and accuracy, in a variety of contexts and situations, when dealing with a wide variety of general matters in the personal, public and professional domains, throughout the Organization.
- Show a good command of a range of linguistic and pragmatic competences and of social language conventions to meet most communication needs.
- Respond autonomously and sufficiently to most required actions.
- Use reference resources to confirm and refine interpretation, and to improve communication.

UN LEVEL

IV

- Use the language efficiently and flexibly, consistently maintaining a high degree of fluency, accuracy and precision. Function in a large variety of demanding contexts and situations, even adverse or unpredictable, when dealing with a wide range of matters, even highly specific or sensitive, in the personal, public and professional domains, throughout the Organization.
- Show an excellent command of a wide range of linguistic and pragmatic competences and of social language conventions to meet any communication need.
- Respond to and follow up on any required action appropriately and without hesitation.
- Use reference resources to enhance communication with sophisticated precision.



UN LEVEL I

Foundational Language Competence

- Use the language in a simple manner, in non-demanding everyday contexts and situations, when dealing with routine or predictable matters in the personal, public and professional domains, throughout the Organization.
- Show basic linguistic competence and use a restricted range of social language conventions to meet simple communication needs.
- Show limited facility in understanding if an action or response is required and some autonomy to respond.
- Usually require reference resources and models, templates or external help to prepare in advance, check understanding or repair communication.



Receptive Activities: Reading

Understand the main message and find specific information, often with the help of visuals or background knowledge, in straightforward, clearly written factual texts of a limited variety of different genres.



Receptive Activities: Listening

Understand the main message in texts delivered clearly at a slow to average rate, in the spoken standard and in favourable conditions, often with the help of visuals and/or background knowledge. Usually request repetition or reformulation.



Spoken Production and Interaction

Participate with some effort in simple, brief and routine exchanges, often requiring the help of the interlocutor.
Produce simple, previously prepared, brief spoken texts.



Written Production and Interaction

Write or draft short simple texts, notes and messages, and produce longer texts with the help of a variety of resources and tools. Write and respond to simple everyday correspondence.



UN LEVEL II

Intermediate Language Competence

- Use the language with moderate fluency and accuracy, in everyday contexts and situations, when dealing with ordinary or general matters in the personal, public and professional domains, throughout the Organization.
- Show an appropriate command of a moderate range of linguistic and pragmatic competences and of social language conventions to meet ordinary general communication needs.
- Understand if any action or response is required and show adequate autonomy to respond.
- Often require reference resources and models or external help to prepare in advance, check understanding and improve or support communication.



Receptive Activities: Reading

Understand the general meaning, and identify the main conclusions and the most relevant details in straightforward, clearly written factual texts of different genres.



Receptive Activities: Listening

Understand the general meaning and identify the main conclusions in texts delivered clearly at an average rate, in the spoken standard. May often require reformulation or repetition of a word or a phrase.



Spoken Production and Interaction

Take part with ease in routine interactions, making statements and expressing personal opinions. Produce, with or without previous preparation, short to medium-length spoken texts. Relay the key points contained in an oral or written communication.



Written Production and Interaction

Write or draft short texts in different genres on concrete matters. In written exchanges, respond appropriately using writing conventions. Relay the key points contained in an oral or written communication.



UN LEVEL III

Advanced Language Competence

- Use the language efficiently, with a high degree of fluency and accuracy, in a variety of contexts and situations, when dealing with a wide variety of general matters in the personal, public and professional domains, throughout the Organization.
- Show a good command of a range of linguistic and pragmatic competences and of social language conventions to meet most communication needs.
- Respond autonomously and sufficiently to most required actions.
- Use reference resources to confirm and refine interpretation, and to improve communication.



Receptive Activities: Reading

Understand most written texts of different genres and of different lengths, identifying essential information, the most relevant details, and the tone and the viewpoints expressed – both implicit and explicit. Understand most commonly used idiomatic and figurative language, and explicit sociocultural references.



Receptive 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 texts delivered clearly at an average to fast rate, in standard varieties, and in moderately demanding contexts or noisy backgrounds. May occasionally require repetition of a word or a phrase.



Spoken Production and Interaction

Take part naturally in a variety of interactions, arguing opinions and showing the ability to respond to different viewpoints. Produce clear and well-structured spoken texts of different lengths with appropriate detail. Relay and efficiently summarize the main information contained in an oral or written communication.



Written Production and Interaction

Write clear and well-organized texts in different genres. In written exchanges, respond showing the ability to competently match register and style to the communicative situation. Relay and efficiently summarize the main information contained in an oral or written communication.

IV

UN LEVEL IV Expert Language Competence

- Use the language efficiently and flexibly, consistently maintaining a high degree of fluency, accuracy and precision.
- Function in a large variety of demanding contexts and situations, even adverse or unpredictable, when dealing with a wide range of matters, even highly specific or sensitive, in the personal, public and professional domains, throughout the Organization.
- Show an excellent command of a wide range of linguistic and pragmatic competences and of social language conventions to meet any communication need.
- Respond to and follow up on any required action appropriately and without hesitation.
- Use reference resources to enhance communication with sophisticated precision.



Receptive Activities: Reading

Thoroughly understand linguistically and/or conceptually complex written texts of different genres and lengths, capturing implicit meanings and subtleties, concrete or abstract, even in unfamiliar contexts. Understand a wide range of idiomatic and figurative language, and sociocultural references.



Receptive Activities: Listening

Understand without any notable effort, capturing implicit meanings and subtleties, linguistically and/or conceptually complex texts delivered at an average to fast rate, in a range of non-standard varieties, even in unfavourable situations. Understand a wide range of idiomatic and figurative language, and sociocultural references.



Spoken Production and Interaction

Take part fluently in a variety of demanding situations, arguing opinions skilfully, building on different contributions, and showing the ability to take the lead and to intervene diplomatically. Produce a wide range of spoken texts with different purposes. Relay and synthesize information contained in texts of varied typology and complexity in oral or written communication.



Written Production and Interaction

Write reasonably complex and/or long texts in different genres. In demanding written exchanges, respond effectively, confidently matching register and style to the communicative situation. Relay and synthesize information contained in texts of varied typology and complexity in oral or written communication.

Glossary

TERM	DEFINITION
Accuracy	Accuracy refers to how correct learners' use of the language system is, including their use of grammar, pronunciation and vocabulary.
Adequate	Satisfactory or acceptable in quality or quantity.
Appropriate/ Appropriately	Suitable or correct for a particular situation or set of circumstances.
Context/ Situation	Context refers to the macro-level circumstances surrounding a communication act, such as the time, place, status of interlocutors, and other factors which affect the interaction. A group of contexts will make up a given domain. Situation refers to the micro-level communicative functions which take place in a variety of contexts.
Domain	A domain defines the area in which the interaction or communication takes place. The UN Language Framework takes three domains into consideration: the personal, public and professional domains, throughout the Organization. Therefore, all domains are to be understood primarily in the UN context. - The personal domain concerns interpersonal relationships, individual social practices, discussions with colleagues or friends on personal matters, such as likes or dislikes, hobbies, housing, family, etc. - The public domain refers to activities taking place within, and extended to, the general public, including transactions of various kinds, such as administrative tasks, dealing with public services, engaging in cultural and leisure activities, etc. - The professional domain encompasses everything concerned with a person's activities in the exercise of their occupation, mainly related to international organizations. It also includes educational elements, especially if they are related to training and development.
Efficiency	The ability to convey the intended message as effectively as possible, while also maintaining an appropriate register.
Everyday/ Routine	Everyday: mostly familiar contexts or situations, occurring frequently. Routine: elements of verbal, and non-verbal, communication that are almost formulaic and can be performed automatically, such as repetitive tasks.
Facility	The ability to do something well without a lot of difficulty or effort.
Flexibility	The ability to readily improvise and adapt language to changing circumstances without advance preparation, including the communication form, whether written or spoken. This includes register (formal, informal, etc.), social context (neutral, ironic, etc.) and vocabulary (technical, vernacular, etc.).

TERM	DEFINITION
Fluency	The ability to use a language automatically, spontaneously and without much hesitation, such that the communication goal is achieved without undue strain on anyone involved.
General/ Ordinary	<p>General: not specialized or limited in range of subject, application, or activity. It also conveys the idea of being accessible to a large public.</p> <p>Ordinary: commonplace; not different, special, or unexpected in any way. It also conveys the idea of familiar, frequent, everyday activities.</p>
Key Points	These are the principal or most salient ideas in a text. You can understand the key points in a text without necessarily understanding all the details in that text.
Matter	A matter is a subject or situation under consideration. For the purposes of clarity, matter could be replaced by topic, a more general concept.
Models/ Templates	<p>Model: an existing example of a text, i.e. an email, an article, a recording, etc., that can be used as a reference for generating similar ones.</p> <p>Template: a highly structured text form or layout, typically with minimal content, used to generate copies or new texts with only content related modifications.</p>
Ordinary/ General	<p>Ordinary: commonplace; not different, special, or unexpected in any way. It also conveys the idea of familiar, frequent, everyday activities.</p> <p>General: not specialized or limited in range of subject, application, or activity. It also conveys the idea of being accessible to a large public.</p>
Precision	This includes accuracy but goes beyond the mere absence of errors to include exactitude and specificity.
Reference Resources	<p>Any source that provides help to better prepare, understand or produce a linguistic message. Examples of most commonly used reference resources:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - authoritative or official works, i.e. dictionaries, encyclopaedias, glossaries, etc. - tools such as voice recognition, digital correctors, online references, etc. - people who provide help or feedback on the linguistic message

TERM	DEFINITION
Relay/ Summarize	Relay: to receive and transfer information. Summarize: to provide a brief restatement of the main ideas of a written or oral text.
Routine/ Everyday	See “Routine/Everyday” above.
Situation and Context	Situation refers to the micro-level communicative functions which take place in a variety of contexts. Context refers to the macro-level circumstances surrounding a communication act, such as the time, place, status of interlocutors, and other factors which affect the interaction. A group of contexts will make up a given domain.
Social Agent	Language learners/users, as social agents, are members of society who have tasks to accomplish in a given set of circumstances and in a specific environment. These tasks are often language-related but not exclusively so. Social agents collaborate, negotiate meaning, arrive at consensus, and communicate effectively both orally and through various text forms, thereby developing plurilingual and pluricultural competence, as well as developing communication strategies.
Standard (spoken or written)	(Short for ‘standard varieties of a language’) Standard varieties are generally understood and used by a large group of people. They are usually encoded in reference works and used primarily in semi-formal and formal contexts, and in public discourse, both spoken and written.
Summarize/ Relay	See “Relay/Summarize” above.
Templates and models	See “Models and templates” above.
Texts	Any passage of written or spoken words, of whatever length, that forms a connected whole to express a unified message. Examples of written texts include reports, proposals, memorandums, letters, emails, press releases, text messages, newsletters, posters, essays, etc. Examples of spoken texts include news stories, interviews, dialogues, monologues (e.g., a speech or a lecture), phone conversations, discussions, etc.

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Language & Communication Programme (LCP) at UN Headquarters New York
Language Training Programme (LTP) at UN Office in Geneva
United Nations