United Nations

HARMONIZATION OF LANGUAGE
LEARNING AND ASSESSMENT
THROUGHOUT THE UNITED NATIONS GLOBAL SECRETARIAT

The UN Levels of Language Competence - A Reading Guide

I. 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 Framework for language learning and assessment, equally valid for the six languages. One of the main components of this Framework is the definition of four levels of language proficiency, 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 in turn allow for more efficient management of language programmes, stronger recognition of language skills, and smoother transitions in career mobility and development.

This guide aims to help readers 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. Readers 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:

- the descriptors for the four UN Language Levels, including an overall descriptor and specific descriptors for the four skill areas: Listening, Reading, Spoken Production and Interaction; Written Production and Interaction

- a glossary of some of the terms used in the descriptors, which may be open to interpretation

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

Please note that the glossary is a work in progress and further terms will be added in an upcoming final version in the continual development of this reading guide.

Importantly and for your information, language professionals, including instructors, course designers, examiners and focal points, and other interested stakeholders will have larger documentation and concrete examples available. In this respect, readers are invited to regularly consult:

https://hr.un.org/page/harmonization-language-learning-and-assessment

II. UN Level Descriptors

United Nations Language Framework
Levels of Language Competence
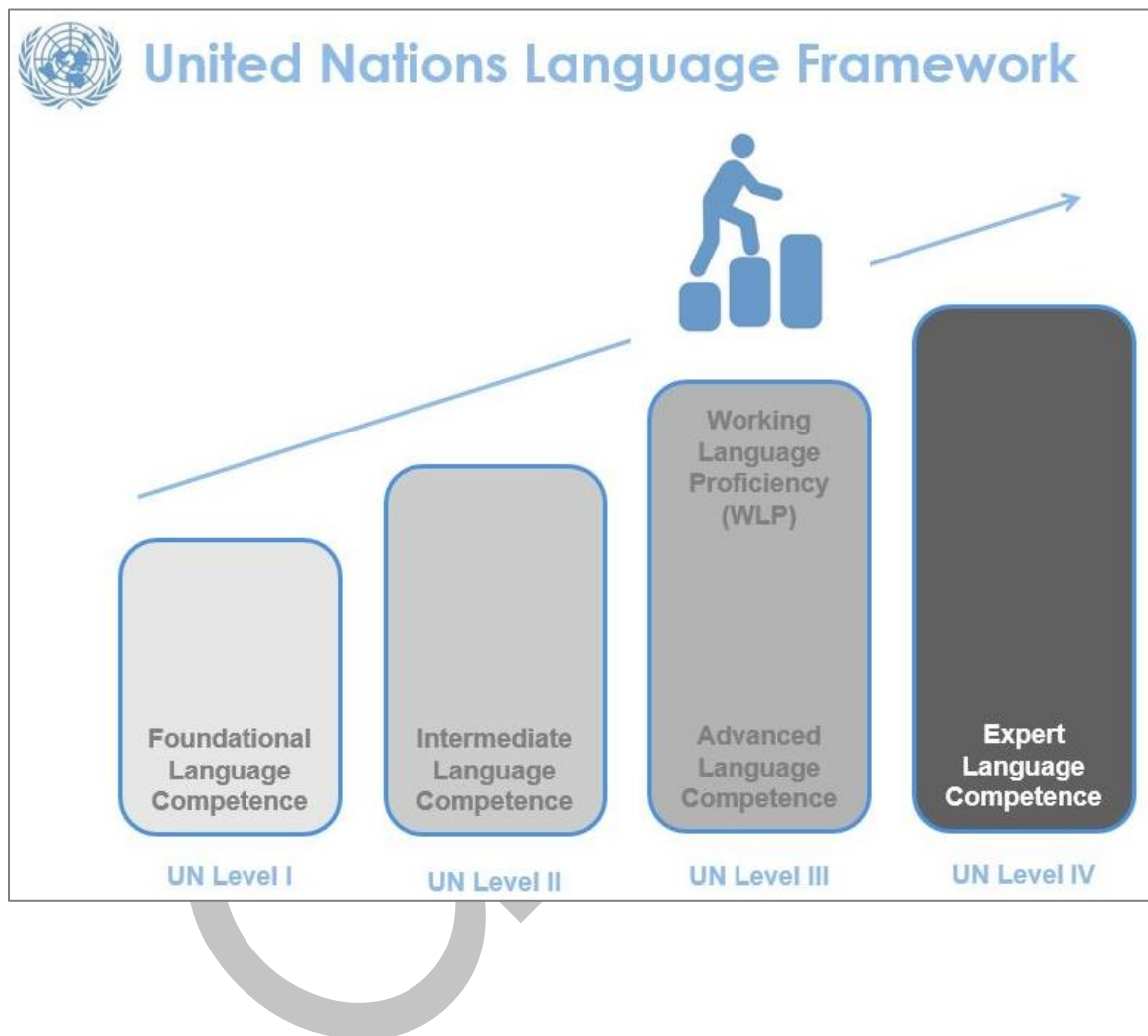
UN Level I Foundational Language Competence

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 within the Organization.

UN Level I

1 Use the language in a simple manner within the Organization, in non-demanding everyday contexts and situations, when dealing with routine predictable, personal and public topics and matters.
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.

Reception Activities: Reading

1 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.

Reception 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

1 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.

In preparation - Content development for UN Level I

UN Level II Intermediate 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 within the Organization.

UN Level II

2   Use the language with moderate fluency and accuracy within the Organization, in everyday contexts and situations, when dealing with ordinary general, personal, public and work-related topics and matters.
Show an appropriate command of a moderate range of linguistic, discursive 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.

Reception activities: Reading

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

Reception 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

2   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 main 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 main key points contained in an oral or written communication.

In preparation - Content development for UN Level II

UN Level III Advanced 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 within the Organization.

UN Level III

3   Use the language efficiently, with fluency and accuracy within the Organization, in a variety of contexts and situations, when dealing with a variety of general, personal, public and work-related topics and matters.
Show a good command of a range of linguistic, discursive 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.

Reception activities: Reading

3   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.

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 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 of a phrase.

Spoken Production and Interaction

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

In preparation - Content development for UN Level III

UN Level IV Expert 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 within the Organization.

UN Level IV

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

4

Reception activities: Reading	Reception Activities: Listening
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.	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 unfavorable situations. Understand a wide range of idiomatic and figurative language, and sociocultural references.

4

Spoken Production and Interaction	Written 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.	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. Proofread or edit own texts or texts produced by others.

In preparation - Content development for UN Level IV

III. Glossary

Accuracy refers to the language system, including the use of grammar, pronunciation and vocabulary, and how correct this is.

Adequately qualifies a communication as satisfactory or acceptable in quality.

Note - The false friend - adéquat - indicates a higher standard in quality.

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.

Situation refers to the micro-level communicative functions which take place in a variety of contexts.
e.g., Context = working life
Situation = a meeting

A context can be understood as a scenario and the situation as an activity.

Efficiency is the ability to convey the intended message as concisely as possible, while also maintaining an appropriate register

Flexibility is 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.). Flexibility requires an expert command of the language.

Fluency is the ability to use a language automatically, spontaneously and without a lot of hesitation, such that the communication goal is achieved without undue strain on anyone involved. It is only one indicator of proficiency.

Models/Templates

Model: is an existing example of a text (i.e., an e-mail, an article, etc.) that can be used as a reference for generating similar ones.

Template: is a highly structured text form or layout, typically with minimal content, used to generate copies or new texts with only content related modifications.

Precision includes accuracy but goes beyond the mere absence of errors to include exactitude and specificity.

Reference Resources

Any source that provides help to better prepare, understand or produce a linguistic message. Examples of most commonly used reference resources:

- authoritative or official works (i.e., dictionaries, encyclopedias, glossaries)
- tools such as apps, voice recognition, digital correctors, etc.
- people who provide help or feedback on the linguistic message

Relay/Summarize

Relay means to transfer or receive information.

Summarize means to provide a brief restatement of the key points of a written or oral text.

Routine/Everyday

Routine refers to elements of communication that are almost formulaic and can be performed automatically.

Everyday refers to familiar contexts or situations.

Texts are written or spoken words that form a connected piece of work.

Examples of **written texts** include reports, proposals, memorandums, letters, e-mails, 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.