

Assessing English Language Development in 4-Year-Olds

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Assessing English Language Development in 4-Year-Old Kindergarten (4K) Students

English language proficiency in very young children:

The term English language proficiency (ELP) and its accompanying English language proficiency levels were originally defined and used for English language learners in grades K-12. According to state and federal law¹, any student whose first language is other than English OR lives in a home where another language is spoken OR has had significant exposure to another language must be assessed for English language proficiency. Any student found to be limited in his or her English proficiency must be assessed annually for ELP until they reach proficiency².

Using this term with 4K students presents many challenges as well as incongruities because *all* preschoolers are still in the active stage of processing and acquiring language. A native English-speaking 4-year-old's language is still not completely developed, although they would be considered proficient for their age level in the English-speaking world if they meet certain age-appropriate developmental milestones in receptive and expressive language.

The developmental milestones in receptive and expressive language which we refer to in our U.S. schools and which we use to determine typical language development

¹ See Appendix A for definitions of LEP from state and federal law and Wisconsin and WIDA descriptions of ELP levels. Note: The term "limited-English proficient (LEP) students" is the legal term for students who are English language learners (ELLs) both in state statute and federal law. However, *English language learners* is the preferred term found in literature today.

² See Appendix B for cites from state and federal law requiring annual ELP assessment of all ELLs K-12.

in preschoolers were developed with monolingual, native English-speaking preschoolers. New research is currently emerging regarding language development in bilingual preschoolers. While that research demonstrates that developmental milestones still exist for typically developing bilingual preschoolers, nuances in those milestones differ from language to language and within languages (Bedore, L.M. & Pena, E.D., 2008). How language proficiency or typical language development in bilingual preschoolers is determined is more complicated than for their monolingual peers.

Nevertheless, school districts often assess the ELP of preschoolers entering 4K for the purposes of reporting in the state Individual Student Enrollment System (ISES). Districts are struggling to understand the state requirements in this area, as well as how to best assess these young children given the very limited range and appropriateness of formal assessment tools. Standardized ELP assessment tools that do exist for 4-year-olds, such as the Pre-LAS and the Woodcock-Muñoz, often assess isolated and limited language samples—rarely giving a functional or true picture of the 4-year-old’s English language skills. Although they may yield accurate results for the preschool ELLs who speak little to no English, they provide very limited information about the English language development of more English proficient preschoolers.

What these instruments do provide school districts, however, is a number, or quantitative data that can be reported to the state as an ELP level. Qualitative assessment instruments, which may yield a more functional and realistic picture of the preschooler’s English language development, are often not used precisely because they do not provide that number or ELP Level for reporting purposes. Districts then struggle with how to assign ELP levels.

The purpose of the following information is to address these issues and offer preliminary guidelines when assessing 4-year-olds for English language proficiency. It is designed to help districts appropriately assess their 4-year-old students in a way that informs instruction as well as serves state reporting procedures in ISES. *When not directly referring to state reporting procedures, the term English language development (ELD) will be used in place of English language proficiency to more accurately reflect the language acquisition process of this young age group.*

State and federal requirements:

Wisconsin's bilingual-bicultural statute states that a district may establish preschool programs such as 4-year-old kindergarten or summer school programs, but gives no parameters for assessing the English language proficiency of preschoolers. According to the Department of Public Instruction's (DPI) *English Language Proficiency Collection and Reporting* (<http://dpi.wi.gov/lbstat/dataelp.html>):

...neither NCLB nor state law requires assessment or services for ELLs at grade levels earlier than Kindergarten (KG). If students at earlier grades are assessed, then their English Language Proficiency codes should reflect the results of the assessment used. Students who are not assessed cannot be counted as ELL/LEP (ELP Codes 1-5).

Note that in the above quote, Kindergarten (KG) refers only to 5-year-old kindergarten and not 4-year-old kindergarten. DPI then provides the following suggestions if districts choose to assess their 4-year-old kindergarten students:

In the absence of a more complete assessment, districts are encouraged to assess potential ELL pre-kindergarten students using an informal English language inventory. Performance levels in the *WIDA ELP Standards Book* can be used as a guide. Results of the inventory can be used to estimate a student's English language proficiency code. Use ELP 7 for pre-kindergarten students who are not assessed or who are determined to be higher than ELP 5.

Further Suggested practice for assessing English language development (ELD) levels in 4K:

Be very clear about your *intended purpose* because this will influence the type of instrument you use or the manner in which you assess preschoolers. Best practice dictates that assessing preschoolers for English language development would be conducted for more than simply state reporting purposes. It is important that professionals conducting ELD assessments with preschoolers be well-versed in the process of second language acquisition as well as typical language development in young children. Some purposes typically used for ELD testing with preschoolers include:

- To gather information on a preschoolers' level of English language development
- To inform instructional practice
- To inform instructional groupings
- To show growth over time in English language development
- To report ELP levels to the state

Use qualitative data to supplement any data obtained from formal assessment tools:

Examples of qualitative data include:

- Language samples gathered in different environments and during varying activities and routines
- Observations in different environments and during varying activities and routines
- Extensive language history gathered from parents and other caregivers

The Language Development Profile (see Appendix) is a sample informal assessment tool that can be used for collecting these types of qualitative data.

State reporting of ELP levels for 4K:

Patton Tabors (2008) has done extensive research with bilingual preschoolers, both those who learned one language before the other (sequential bilinguals) and those who learned more than one language at the same time (simultaneous bilinguals). She outlines four stages of English language development that preschoolers typically go through when acquiring English as a second language.

Following are descriptions of Tabors' stages (2008) and their approximate alignment to DPI English Language Proficiency (ELP) levels. Note that this alignment was *not* created or established by Tabors and is to be used for informal comparison purposes only. Districts that use informal assessment measures as recommended in DPI's *English Language Proficiency Collection and Reporting*, may use this comparison chart as an additional resource to WIDA's ELP performance levels when estimating a preschooler's English language proficiency level.

Tabors Language Stages and Approximate Corresponding English Language Proficiency DPI Levels

Home Language Stage (*corresponds to DPI ELP Level 1*):

- Child continues to speak in home language even if individuals cannot understand that language
- Child is in process of figuring out that a different language is being spoken
- Time period in this stage varies

Non-Verbal Stage (*corresponds to DPI ELP Level 1*):

- Child abandons attempts to speak to people who do not understand
- Compared to “silent” stage of older children
- Not completely silent in that child often engages in non-verbal alternate forms of communication (gestures, facial expressions, etc.)

Telegraphic and Formulaic Stage (*corresponds to DPI ELP Level 2*):

- Child makes decision to learn new language
- Child “goes public” with their English
- Telegraphic—names for people or things act as complete utterance (e.g., “juice” to signify “I want juice”)
- Formulaic—observed phrases to help children communicate (e.g., “Oh man”, “Excuse me”, “Uh-oh”, “Okay, okay”)

Productive Language Stage (*Corresponds to DPI ELP Levels 3 & 4*):

- Child has acquired enough vocabulary and useful phrases
- Child creates own sentences and phrases
- Child builds on learned phrases, words, and strategies from previous stages (constructivist process)
- Child starts figuring out how the language is constructed
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References

Bedore, L. M. & Pena, E. D. (2008). Assessment of bilingual children for identification of language impairment: Current findings and implications for practice. *The International Journal of Bilingual Education and Bilingualism* 11 (1), 1-27.

Tabors, P. (2008). *One Child, Two Languages* (2nd Ed.). Baltimore, MD: Paul Brookes Publishing.

Wisconsin Department of Public Education (2003-04). “*English Language Proficiency Collection and Reporting.*” <http://dpi.wi.gov/lbstat/dataelp.html>

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APPENDIX A

DEFINITION OF LIMITED-ENGLISH PROFICIENT IN STATE AND FEDERAL LAW

Wisconsin State Statute – Bilingual-Bicultural Education

“Limited-English proficient pupil” means a pupil whose ability to use the English language is limited because of the use of a non-English language in his or her family or in his or her daily, nonschool surroundings, and who has difficulty, as defined by rule by the state superintendent, in performing ordinary classwork in English as a result of such limited English language proficiency.

[s. 115.955(7), Wis. Stats.]

Federal – Title IX, ESEA

The term “limited English proficient”, when used with respect to an individual, means an individual –

- (A) who is aged 3 through 21;
- (B) who is enrolled or preparing to enroll in an elementary school or secondary school;
- (C)(i) who was not born in the United States or whose native language is a language other than English;
 - (ii)(I) who is a Native American or Alaska Native, or a native resident of the outlying areas; and
 - (II) who comes from an environment where a language other than English has had a significant impact on the individual’s level of English language proficiency; or
 - (iii) who is migratory, whose native language is a language other than English, and who comes from an environment where a language other than English is dominant; and
- (D) whose ability in speaking, reading, writing, or understanding the English language may be sufficient to deny the individual –
 - (i) the ability to meet the State’s proficient level of achievement on State Assessments described in section 6311(b)(3) of this title;
 - (ii) the ability to successfully achieve in classrooms where the language of instruction is English; or
 - (iii) the opportunity to participate fully in society.

[Sec. 9109, No Child Left Behind Act, 2001]

ENGLISH LANGUAGE PROFICIENCY LEVELS

The definitions of the five limited-English language proficiency levels, as well as Level 6, one of two fully-English language proficiency levels, are from PI 13.08(3)(1)-(6), Wisconsin Administrative Rule. Level 7, the other fully-English language proficiency level, is used for purposes of state reporting/state testing.

Level 1 – Beginning/Preproduction [WIDA Level = Entering]:

A pupil shall be classified level 1 if the pupil does not understand or speak English with the exception of a few isolated words or expressions.

Level 2 – Beginning/Production [WIDA Level = Beginning]:

A pupil shall be classified level 2 if all of the following criteria are met:

- (a) The pupil understands and speaks conversational and academic English with hesitancy and difficulty.
- (b) The pupil understands parts of lessons and simple directions.
- (c) The pupil is at a pre-emergent or emergent level of reading and writing in English, significantly below grade level.

Level 3 – Intermediate [WIDA Level = Developing]:

A pupil shall be classified level 3 if all of the following criteria are met:

- (a) The pupil understands and speaks conversational and academic English with decreasing hesitancy and difficulty.
- (b) The pupil is post-emergent, developing reading comprehension and writing skills in English.
- (c) The pupil's English literacy skills allow the student to demonstrate academic knowledge in content areas with assistance.

Level 4 – Advanced Intermediate [WIDA Level = Expanding]:

A pupil shall be classified level 4 if all of the following criteria are met:

- (a) The pupil understands and speaks conversational English without apparent difficulty, but understands and speaks academic English with some hesitancy.
- (b) The pupil continues to acquire reading and writing skills in content areas needed to achieve grade level expectations with assistance.

Level 5 – Advanced [WIDA Level = Bridging]:

A pupil shall be classified level 5 if all of the following criteria are met:

- (a) The pupil understands and speaks conversational and academic English well.

(b) The pupil is near proficient in reading, writing, and content area skills needed to meet grade level expectations.

(c) The pupil requires occasional support.

Level 6 – Formerly Limited-English Proficient/Now Fully-English Proficient:

A pupil shall be classified level 6 if all of the following criteria are met:

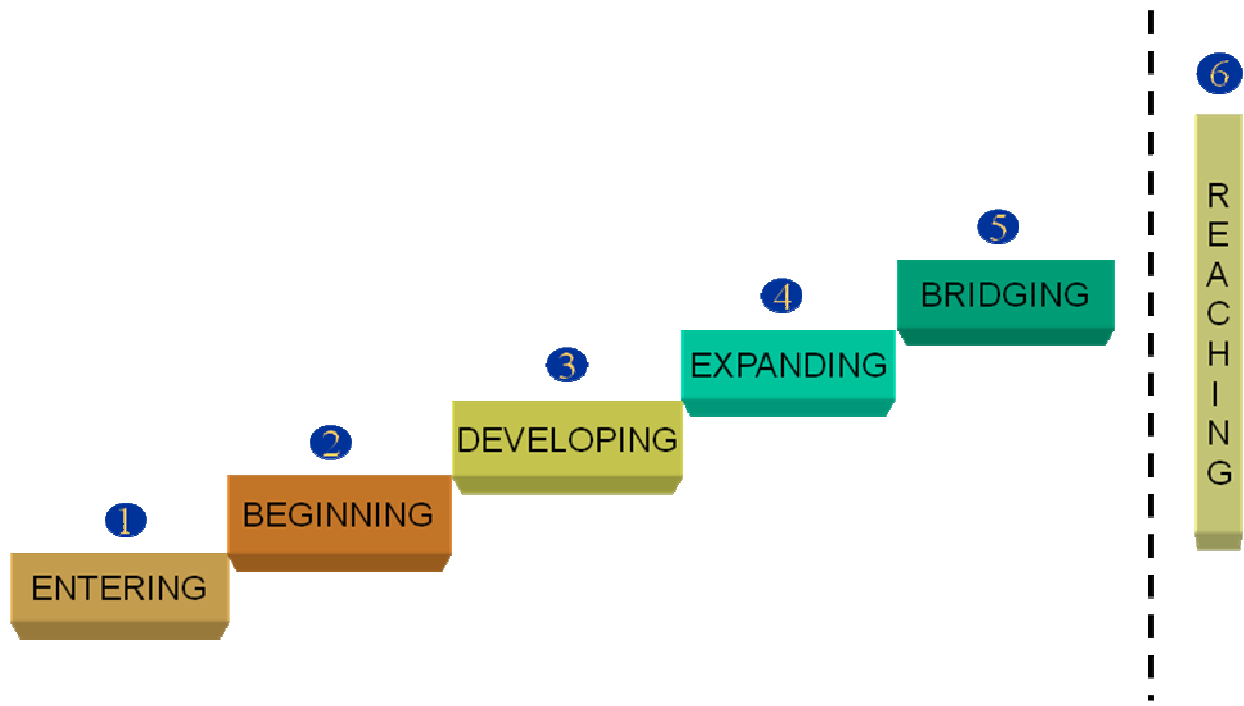
(a) The pupil was formerly limited-English proficient and is now fully English proficient.

(b) The pupil reads, writes, speaks and comprehends English within academic classroom settings.

Level 7 – Fully-English Proficient/Never Limited-English Proficient:

The student was never classified as limited-English proficient and does not fit the definition of a limited-English proficient student outlined in either state or federal law.

WIDA English Language Proficiency Levels



WIDA Performance Definitions

<p>6 Reaching</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Specialized or technical language reflective of the content area at grade level; • A variety of sentence lengths of varying Linguistic Complexity in extended oral or written discourse as required at the specified grade level; • Oral and written communication of English comparable to that of English proficient peers
<p>5 Bridging</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The technical language of the content areas; • A variety of sentence lengths of varying Linguistic Complexity in extended oral or written discourse, including stories, essays, or reports; • Oral or written language approaching comparability to that of English proficient peers when presented with grade level material
<p>4 Expanding</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Specific and some technical language of the content areas; • A variety of sentence lengths of varying Linguistic Complexity in oral discourse or multiple, related paragraphs; • Oral or written language with minimal phonological, syntactic, or semantic errors that do not impede the overall meaning of the communication when presented with oral or written connected discourse with occasional visual and graphic support
<p>3 Developing</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • General and some specific language of the content areas; • Expanded sentences in oral interaction or written paragraphs; • Oral or written language with phonological, syntactic, or semantic errors that may impede the communication but retain much of its meaning when presented with oral or written, narrative or expository descriptions with occasional visual and graphic support
<p>2 Beginning</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • General language related to the content areas; • Phrases or short sentences; • Oral or written language with phonological, syntactic, or semantic errors that often impede the meaning of the communication when presented with one to multiple-step commands, directions, questions, or a series of statements with visual and graphic support
<p>1 Entering</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Pictorial or graphic representation of the language of the content areas; • Words, phrases, or chunks of language when presented with one-step commands, directions, WH-questions, or statements with visual and graphic support

APPENDIX B

STATE STATUTE AND FEDERAL LAW REQUIRING ASSESSMENT OF ENGLISH LANGUAGE PROFICIENCY

STATE STATUTE:

Required annually by state statute:

s.115.96 (1), Wis. Stats.: "Count of limited-English proficient pupils. Annually, on or before March 1, each school board shall conduct a count of the limited-English proficient pupils in the public schools of the district, **assess the language proficiency** of such pupils and classify such pupils by language group, grade level, age and English language proficiency."

NO CHILD LEFT BEHIND (NCLB):

Required annually by NCLB (under Title I)

Sec. 1111(b)(7): "(7) ACADEMIC ASSESSMENTS OF ENGLISH LANGUAGE PROFICIENCY. —Each State plan shall demonstrate that local educational agencies in the State will, beginning not later than school year 2002–2003, provide for an **annual assessment of English proficiency** (measuring students' oral language, reading, and writing skills in English) of all students with limited English proficiency in the schools served by the State educational agency, except that the Secretary may provide the State 1 additional year if the State demonstrates that exceptional or uncontrollable circumstances, such as a natural disaster or a precipitous and unforeseen decline in the financial resources of the State, prevented full implementation of this paragraph by that deadline and that the State will complete implementation within the additional 1-year period."

[emphasis added]