

How to Use the Alberta K–12 ESL Proficiency Benchmarks

Purpose

The *Alberta K–12 ESL Proficiency Benchmarks* are a language proficiency assessment developed in Alberta as an informal criterion based assessment. They were designed for use by teachers of English language learners and can be used to assess language proficiency in the classroom context. In most cases, teachers will only need the Benchmarks and multiple samples of student work to assess language proficiency in the classroom. Some teachers may wish to assess the Benchmarks in reading in conjunction with a reading assessment.

The benchmarks:

- provide descriptions of language proficiency for each grade-level division
- support schools in delivering effective instruction and program planning for English language learners by:
 - identifying initial language proficiency levels of students
 - developing consistency in assessment of language proficiency for English language learners
 - promoting collaboration and communication about an English language learner’s progress among all of the student’s teachers
- support teachers in:
 - assessing, monitoring, tracking and reporting language proficiency
 - communicating with students and parents to develop an understanding of language acquisition
 - planning for explicit language instruction within everyday classroom learning.

When Are the Benchmarks Used?

The Benchmarks are used:

- when English language learners enter the school system in order to establish baseline proficiency and to identify the level and types of instructional supports these learners require to be successful
- at each reporting period to assess students’ current English language proficiency
- on an ongoing basis to monitor language proficiency growth and to inform instructional planning
- at transitions between grades, schools and/or programs.

Who Uses the Benchmarks?

The Benchmarks were designed to be used by:

- all teachers of English language learners
- ESL specialists
- ESL consultants
- school administrators.

Getting Started Using the Benchmarks

Step 1

Use the “Characteristics of English Language Learners” document to identify which proficiency level best describes the student. This will be your starting point for assessment.

Step 2

Use the Benchmarks for the appropriate grade-level division. Review the Benchmarks indicators for the level identified as a starting point. Also consider the Benchmarks indicators for the level above and the level below to identify which level the student consistently demonstrates. These observations can be recorded on the related tracking sheets.

Step 3

Use this information to:

- inform planning and classroom instruction
- determine the level of supports required
- communicate with students and parents
- share the relevant Benchmarks Summary with other teachers working with this student.

Benchmarks Levels

The Alberta K–12 ESL Proficiency Benchmarks reflect how development and academic language expectations increase from one grade-level division to the next.

Benchmarks Levels					
Kindergarten	1	2	3	4	5
Division 1 Grades 1–3	1	2	3	4	5
Division 2 Grades 4–6	1	2	3	4	5
Division 3 Grades 7–9	1	2	3	4	5
Division 4 Grades 10–12	1	2	3	4	5

Benchmarks Language Strands

Within each grade-level division, the Benchmarks are organized according to four language strands: Listening, Speaking, Reading and Writing. Based on age-appropriate language development expectations, the Kindergarten Benchmarks include only the Listening and Speaking strands.

These strands can be viewed as receptive (receiving information and ideas) and productive (producing information and ideas) or oral (transmitted aloud) and written (transmitted in print).

	Receptive	Productive
Oral	Listening	Speaking
Written	Reading	Writing

... oral language

	Receptive	Productive
Oral	Listening	Speaking
Written	Reading	Writing

... receptive language

	Receptive	Productive
Oral	Listening	Speaking
Written	Reading	Writing

... written language

	Receptive	Productive
Oral	Listening	Speaking
Written	Reading	Writing

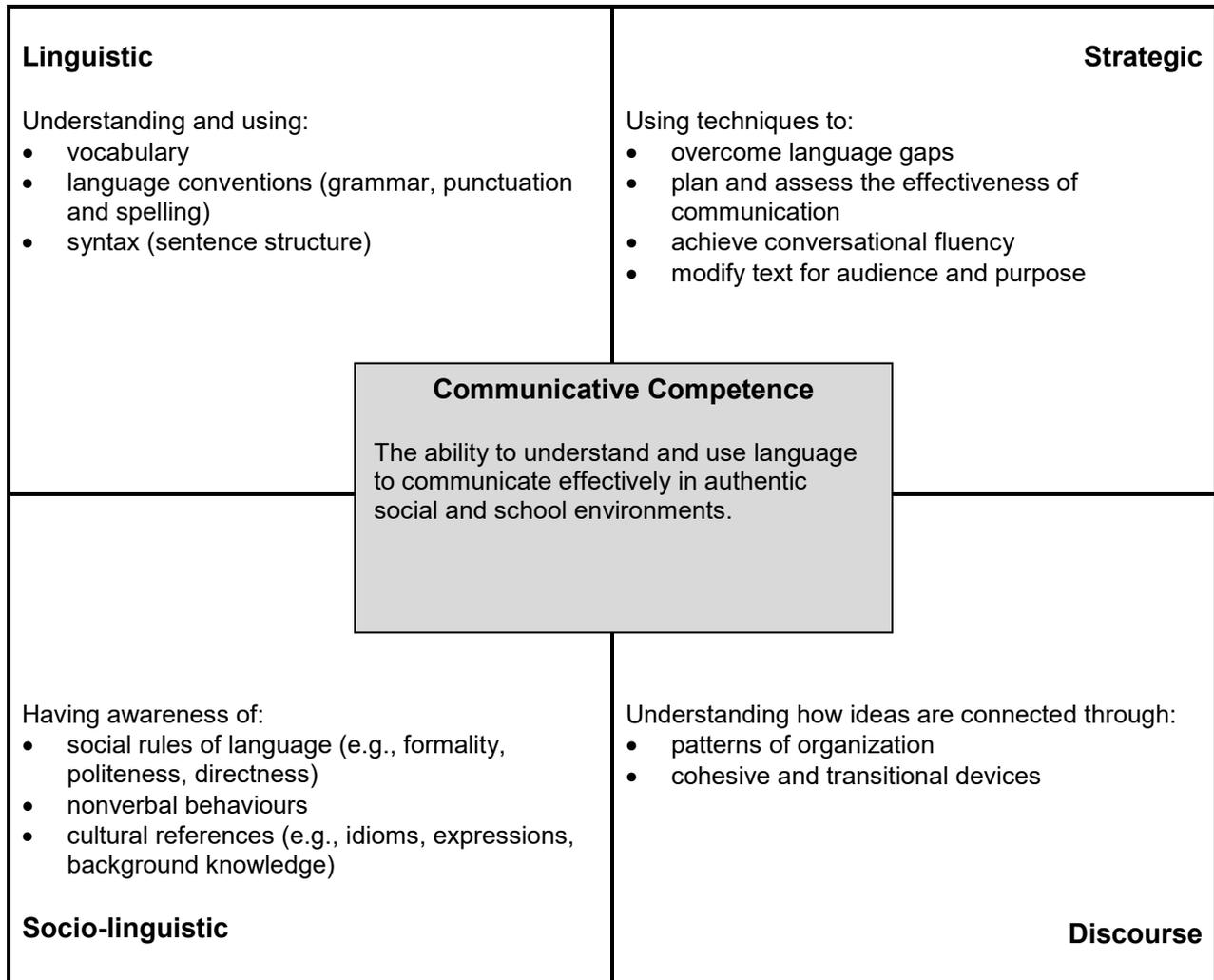
... or productive language

	Receptive	Productive
Oral	Listening	Speaking
Written	Reading	Writing

Communicative Competence

Communicative language teaching involves developing language proficiency through interactions embedded in meaningful contexts. This approach to teaching provides authentic opportunities for learning that go beyond repetition and memorization of grammatical patterns in isolation. A central concept of the communicative approach to language teaching is communicative competence, the learner’s ability to understand and use language to communicate effectively in authentic (rather than simulated) social and school environments.

The table below illustrates how each communicative area contributes to communicative competence.



Strand Specific Competencies

The descriptive indicators within each strand are organized around four communicative competence areas. Each of these strands has an additional communicative focus: auditory discrimination, pronunciation, fluency and editing as shown in the chart below.

	Listening	Speaking	Reading	Writing
Communicative Competencies and Strand-specific Communicative Focus	Linguistic Strategic Socio-linguistic Discourse Auditory Discrimination	Linguistic Strategic Socio-linguistic Discourse Pronunciation	Linguistic Strategic Socio-linguistic Discourse Fluency	Linguistic Strategic Socio-linguistic Discourse Editing

Listening Communicative Focus: *Auditory Discrimination*

Auditory discrimination is the ability to hear specific sounds and words and to recognize changes in tone and other nuances of spoken English.

Speaking Communicative Focus: *Pronunciation*

Pronunciation involves the ability to produce the sounds and intonations of English effectively so that the speaker is understood. Accents are expected and accepted.

Reading Communicative Focus: *Fluency*

Fluency relates to the rate, ease and accuracy with which a student decodes and comprehends a text in English.

Writing Communicative Focus: *Editing*

Editing is the process of reviewing, revising and refining a text for the purpose of improving it based on English language conventions (spelling, punctuation and grammar), word choice, the form of the text, and its intended audience and purpose.

Communicative Competence by Strand – Listening

Listening is the first way in which English language learners involve themselves in the language learning process. It involves hearing, processing and interpreting spoken words by distinguishing sound, rate, pitch, volume and tone as part of the communication process.

Linguistic Competence	Second language listeners must recognize the words they hear. They need to know the basic sounds of letters and syllables, pronunciation of words, intonation and stress. They also need to understand and apply the rules of word formation and sentence formation. The second language student, who can understand how words are segmented into various sounds, and how sentences are stressed in particular ways to convey meaning, finds it easy to understand the meaning of a message. This too, enhances the students' reading and writing skills.
Strategic Competence	Strategic Listening is guessing the meaning by employing the bottom-up skill with top-down processing. In the bottom-up skill the student gets meaning from discrete sounds, individual syllables and separate words. In the top-down processing the student gets meaning from broad contextual clues and background knowledge. The ability to use linguistic and nonlinguistic clues is essential. This combination of these skills and processes assist the learner to predict accurately and to make adjustments accordingly.
Socio-linguistic Competence	The listener adjusts responses to an utterance accordingly. The skilled listener knows when it is appropriate to comment, ask questions or respond non-verbally. The listener is aware of audience, purpose, genre, topic and degree of formality.
Discourse Competence	As students listen to oral text they are able to predict and to anticipate what will follow.

Communicative Competence by Strand – Speaking

Speaking is a vital component of language learning that incorporates verbal communication elements such as intonation, timing, inflection, speed, rhythm and pausing, as well as nonverbal elements to support verbal communication, such as gesturing and facial expressions.

Linguistic Competence	Knowing the basic sounds of letters and syllables, pronunciation of words, intonation and stress. It is understanding and applying the rules of word formation and sentence formation.
Strategic Competence	Strategic speakers master talk techniques using a range of speaking strategies such as paraphrasing, redirecting, clarifying, sustaining, stalling and avoiding.
Socio-linguistic Competence	A speaker uses appropriate language in order to apologize, compliment, (dis)agree, summarize, and persuade. There is knowledge of context and speech is adjusted accordingly; e.g., formal, informal, neutral.
Discourse Competence	Student is able to demonstrate relationships of ideas such as time, cause and effect, contrast and emphasis.

Communicative Competence by Strand – Reading

The process of reading involves decoding (recognizing and understanding letters, numbers and symbols and how they are used to form words and represent ideas) and comprehension (constructing meaning from words, numbers and symbols in different contexts).

Linguistic Competence	It includes knowledge of vocabulary, punctuation, phonological awareness and decoding skills. It involves the reader's knowledge of linguistic structures to understand text.
Strategic Competence	A strategic reader has a repertoire of strategies to compensate for missing knowledge. Cueing systems such as graph-phonemic, syntactic, semantic and contextual cues are applied to regain meaning.
Socio-linguistic Competence	It involves the rules and principles that the reader applies to understand the author's purpose, genre, and level of formality, format and topic. This competence includes knowledge of allusion, metaphors, idioms and figurative language.
Discourse Competence	Readers identify various connectors such as reference, substitution, ellipsis, conjunction, repetition and lexical cohesion in order to understand the relationships between ideas to develop holistic comprehension.

Communicative Competence by Strand – Writing

The process of writing involves exploring, shaping and recording one's thoughts and communicating them through various text forms to particular audiences using appropriate tone and voice. Conventions such as spelling, punctuation, grammar, as well as syntax (sentence structure) and word choice, are elements of the writing process.

Linguistic Competence	It includes grammar, vocabulary and the mechanics of the language. These performance aspects of written language are highly valued in judging the quality of a piece of writing.
Strategic Competence	A strategic writer creates text appropriate to purpose, voice, audience, form and occasion.
Socio-linguistic Competence	The student is able to vary the use of language in terms of audience, purpose, genre, topic and degree of formality. It is through socio-linguistic competence that writers maintain their credibility with their audience.
Discourse Competence	Knowledge of transitional devices that connect one element in a text with another. Transitional devices such as reference, substitution, ellipsis, conjunction and lexical cohesion.

Assessment Tips

The ESL Benchmarks can be used as part of everyday classroom interactions by observing and analyzing student work. The following table offers sample ideas on how to assess language proficiency within the classroom context.

	Individual	Group
Listening	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • One-on-one interview during class time • Listening task in which students complete oral or written response to orally given prompt 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Observation during class discussions, demonstrations and cooperative learning • Listening task in which all students complete written responses to orally given prompts
Speaking	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • One-on-one interview during class time • Interaction during routine reading assessment • Video or audio recording 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Observation during class discussions, demonstrations and cooperative learning • Video or audio recording
Reading	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • During silent reading, student reads an excerpt from a book • Individual reading assessment 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Student reads an excerpt from a shared text during: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – paired or small-group reading – guided reading – literature circles or other organized group reading
Writing	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Individual writing prompt • Individual writing assignments (e.g., journals, notes, reports, projects, essays, tests, surveys) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Group administered writing prompt • Group administered writing assignments with individual completion (e.g., journals, notes, reports, projects, essays, tests, surveys)

Sample Processes for Assessing Language Proficiency

Each school needs to create its own process for teachers to assess English language learners. Depending on the number of English language learners in the classroom or school:

- teachers may assess the English language learners in their own classrooms
- teachers may take responsibility for assessing a particular group of students who they work with, and share the results of the assessment with other teachers working with these particular students.

Involving English language learners in their own assessment of English language proficiency enhances both the process and results of the assessment.

For example, in a junior high with 125 English language learners out of total population of 500 one strategy for organizing assessment could involve:

- Teachers work in pairs to assess eight students who they both teach, either collaboratively completing the assessment or each teacher completing the assessment for four of the students
- At the same time, writing samples are gathered for English language learners by the social studies, science, mathematics and language arts teachers as part of regular assignments and are shared with the assessing teachers.
- During the scheduled staff collaboration time, the pairs of teachers review the assessment information for their eight students, including the writing samples
- The teachers complete the Benchmarks to share information on the overall English language proficiency of the eight students with the other teachers who work with these students.
- Teachers also share their observations with the students and confirm and/or adjust their benchmark assessments.

Using the ESL Benchmarks for Ongoing Assessment and Reporting

ONGOING ASSESSMENT

Throughout the year, ongoing English language proficiency assessment is required to ensure each English language learner is developing the language skills and knowledge expected based on his or her individual abilities and circumstances. The Alberta ESL Benchmarks can be used to establish the English language proficiency levels of students at intervals throughout the school year (e.g., November, March, June) and compared to previous results to establish how the English language learner is progressing.

REPORTING

At regular reporting periods an English language learner's current language proficiency level should be communicated for each of the strands (listening, speaking, reading and writing), showing the language proficiency level in which the student is currently working. It is also important to show how curriculum marks are impacted by limited English proficiency. Comments should also be included to explain to parents and students what the proficiency levels mean.

Tracking Strategies

The downloadable tracking sheets can be used for recording proficiency levels at different points throughout the school year e.g., when students enter the school system, at different report periods, and on an ongoing basis. There is a set of tracking sheets (Listening, Speaking, Reading and Writing) for each division: grades 1-3, 4-6, 7-9 and 10-12. *Kindergarten tracking sheets are for Listening and Speaking only.*

Consider the following strategies for tracking students' language proficiency:

- Select one student per day to focus on.
- Select one competence in one strand and assess all English language learners during a period or class.
- Use group discussion, oral presentations or group work as opportunities to assess Listening and Speaking.
- Select a writing assignment and use it as a sample to assess the benchmarks for Writing.
- As part of an informal or formal reading assessment, complete the benchmarks for Reading.

Use the information from the tracking sheets to plan instruction and choose appropriate materials and resources for each English language learner Consider the description of student performance one level above where the student currently functions, and use this information to plan instruction and activities. For example:

The next Speaking indicator in vocabulary for a student may be, “Expresses ideas using some utility, descriptive and subject-specific vocabulary.” To help a student move to this proficiency level the teacher may:

- identify a subject area to use as a context for supporting this specific skill; e.g., science
- review the language of the upcoming unit and identify subject-specific words that the student would need to use in a project, inquiry or presentation
- identify utility, descriptive and other important academic words
- provide instruction on these words, their meaning and use in the context of the unit
- reinforce the words by displaying them where students can see them throughout the unit; e.g., word wall, concept map, or anchor chart
- provide opportunities for the student to record words in a learning journal or personal dictionary.

As you track the student's overall progress, consider that English language learners progress at different rates. For example:

- Some students may be progressing quickly.
- Some students may be progressing slowly despite significant explicit instruction and supports.
- Other students may be “stuck” at a particular level for 18 or more months and require explicit instruction, differentiated materials and instruction, increased support, or an in-depth assessment to further assess their learning needs.

It may take five to seven years for students to become proficient in an additional language. The rate of progress of an English language learner may be influenced by:

- prior English language exposure, experience and instruction (both the quantity of time and the quality of the experience are important)
- home language and literacy level of the student
- home language and literacy level of the parents
- language in the home environment (e.g., a home that is bilingual presents many opportunities for the learner to make connections in both languages)
- language learning skills and strategies acquired in the home language that can be transferred to learning English.

A learner's progress may vary from strand to strand (Listening, Speaking, Reading and Writing). Each learner follows an individual pattern; e.g., quickly progresses in listening, but requires support in speaking, reading and writing. For example some learners may progress most quickly:

- in the receptive areas of listening and reading
- in the productive areas of speaking and writing
- in the oral areas of listening and speaking
- in the literacy areas of reading and writing

A learner's progress may vary between the different communicative competencies. For example some learners may:

- be very strategic and may be at Level 4 in strategic competencies and Level 2 or 3 in other competencies
- have more socio-linguistic awareness and may be at a higher level in socio-linguistic competencies than in other areas
- require additional support and experience to gain an understanding of the nuances of English with respect to discourse competencies

Learners may sometimes appear to regress when acquiring English. This can happen due to a number of factors, such as:

- challenges adjusting to academic language expectations between grade levels
- experimenting with new vocabulary and sentence structures, for example, an English language learner may revert back to simple sentence structures when using new vocabulary, especially when trying to be accurate
- adjusting to life or school changes
- returning from a break in their learning and/or an extended absence from school

A learner’s progression through the ESL Benchmarks from division to division may not be linear. For example:

- A student transitioning between divisions may be assessed at a lower benchmark. This does not indicate regression. As the benchmarks move between divisions, what is expected at each division increases in terms of linguistic complexity. The student assessed at Level 5 in one division may be assessed at Level 4 in the next division as developmental and linguistic expectations increase.
- Language development and understanding of curriculum concepts may progress at different rates. For example, a student may understand a complex concept such as biodiversity yet have limited English with which to share his or her understanding.
- A student with Level 1 proficiency may appear different at each division. The expectations for Level 1 at each division increases. Older students with literacy in their first language have the foundation of learning, concepts and skills to “do more” with less language at the beginner level.
- Students who have had some basic English instruction previously may spend a shorter amount of time in Level 1 or 2.