Levels of English Language Proficiency

The five levels are summarized below. It should be recognized that within each of these levels, students may represent a certain range of proficiencies (low, mid, high).

*Prefunctional*

Students at this level may understand isolated words (particularly school and social environment vocabulary), some high-frequency social conventions, and simple (single word or short phrase) directions, commands and questions. They rely on nonverbal cues, such as gestures and facial expressions, and frequent repetition and rephrasing to understand spoken language. In conversation, they may be able to provide basic information in response to requests and questions. They can ask one- or two-word questions without regard to structure and intonation.

Regarding reading and prereading skills, students at this level may demonstrate an understanding of concepts of print (e.g., front-to-back, top-to-bottom, left-to-right) and begin to track print. They may be able to distinguish letters from other symbolic representations. They can imitate the act of reading (e.g., holding a book and turning pages); however, they get meaning mainly through pictures. Students at this level participate in writing activities by drawing pictures. They may be able to copy letters or form them from memory and may be able to copy some words. They can imitate the act of writing (e.g., scribbling), but their text does not transmit a message. They may attempt to apply writing conventions but do so inappropriately or do so correctly only when copying.

*Beginning*

As LEP students’ oral comprehension increases, they begin to imitate verbalizations by using single words or simple phrases and begin to use English spontaneously. They gradually construct more meaning from the words themselves, but the construction is often incomplete. They are able to generate simple texts that reflect their knowledge level of syntax. These texts may include a significant amount of nonconventional features, such as invented spelling, grammatical inaccuracies, pictorial representations, surface features and rhetorical patterns of the native language (i.e., ways of structuring text from native cultural and language).

*Intermediate*

At this level, students understand more complex speech, but still may require some repetition. They acquire a vocabulary of stock words and phrases covering daily situations. They use English spontaneously, but may have difficulty expressing all their thoughts due to a restricted vocabulary and a limited command of language structure. Students at this level speak in simple sentences, which are comprehensible and appropriate but which are frequently marked by grammatical errors. They may have some trouble comprehending and producing complex structures and academic language.

Proficiency in reading may vary considerably, depending upon the learners’ familiarity and prior experience with themes, concepts, genre, characters and so on. They are most successful constructing meaning from texts for which they have background knowledge upon which to build. They are able to generate more complex texts, a wider variety of texts, and more coherent texts than beginners. Texts still have considerable numbers of non-conventional features.