

Level 5 – Native Speaker Proficiency

We have in mind a well-educated and well-informed native, but a well-educated native is not necessarily competent in all the functions described here.

For a non-native this is an astonishingly high level of competence. Even after a long and distinguished international career Mr Hans Blix - who has a marvellous command of English - insists that his speeches and reports be checked by a native speaker.

Short Definition

Can establish and maintain successful and sophisticated face-to-face and written communication in all social and professional situations.

Full Definition – listening and speaking

Can establish and maintain successful and sophisticated social communication. Can recognise and suitably respond even to subtle differences in the expression of politeness, respect and familiarity. Can talk about current affairs with ease and fluency; can debate political points, joke, and hold his own in repartee.

Can explain the technical concepts and processes of his profession in detail. Can hold a lecture to a sophisticated audience or chair a formal meeting. Can propose and argue for a course of action persuasively and convincingly.

Full Definition – reading and writing

Can understand abstract texts, all literary styles and even some esoteric forms of the language. Can interpret the finer points of contracts – even legal niceties. May be competent to edit or correct other people's drafts. Can write clear, correct mails, letters, memos or reports; can prepare the agenda of a meeting and write the minutes; can compose terms of reference, or draft a contract.

Notes:

- 1) Level 4, one full step down the scale, we define as "full professional proficiency". We mean that at level 4, the person should be able to function well in nearly all social and professional situations.

- 2) The descriptions apply to all languages; they are generalised descriptions: they will not precisely fit any one individual – not even the mythical “well-educated and well-informed native speaker”

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Level 4 – Full Professional Proficiency

By “full professional proficiency” we mean that language will rarely hinder a successful performance of tasks. A person at this level can use the language in his/her social and professional role with authority and conviction. Of course it is always good practice to consult native speakers or experienced colleagues.

Short Definition

Can establish and maintain successful face-to-face and written communication in all ordinary social and professional situations.

Full Definition – listening and speaking

Can establish and maintain successful communication in all ordinary social and professional situations. Speech is fluent, accurate and effective. Can usually recognise and suitably respond to differences in the expression of politeness, respect and familiarity. Can describe and discuss familiar activities and situations clearly.

Can explain all general technical and professional questions in his/her own field with only occasional difficulty. Can report to meetings and actively contribute to discussions. When properly prepared, can propose and argue for a course of action, or function as chairman - though with some lack of finesse. Interpreting and discussing/negotiating the finer points of agreements or contracts will still be difficult.

Full Definition – reading and writing

Understands all ordinary texts addressed to the general reader. Understands almost all written styles of language pertinent to his/her job.

Can compose e-mails, letters, memos or reports with few errors and a broad and suitable vocabulary. Can prepare an agenda for a meeting and write minutes. Can draft proposed terms for an agreement, but the language and legal niceties must be checked – of course. This is anyway best practice.

Notes:

- 1) Level 5 we define as equivalent to a “well-informed, well-educated native speaker”, level 3 we describe as “minimum professional proficiency” – perhaps sufficient for some posts, some countries and some languages.

2) The descriptions apply to all languages; these are generalised descriptions: they will not precisely fit any one individual..

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Level 3 – Minimum Professional Proficiency

Unfortunately (and unfairly) poor language is often equated with poor education and low status. So, at this level of “Minimum professional proficiency” even a very well-qualified person may find it hard to establish the necessary prestige and authority (“pondus”) to have an effect.

Short Definition

Can take part in ordinary social conversation with reasonable success. Can discuss practical professional matters but not very fluently or accurately; theoretical concepts will be hard.

Full Definition – listening and speaking

Can take part in ordinary social conversation with reasonable success. May not notice or be able to interpret subtle distinctions in meaning. Can describe and discuss ordinary familiar situations and activities fairly fluently but with limited vocabulary and rather frequent errors.

Can discuss practical things with work colleagues. Discussing theoretical concepts will be hard: colleagues will need to be both patient and active listeners. Any formal situation – a meeting, reporting to an official, a presentation or a speech – will be difficult. The performance will seem awkward and lacking in finesse. This may interfere with the intended effect.

Full Definition – reading and writing

Can read and understand most of the language of ordinary texts addressed to the general reader. But at this level, the person will find a quality newspaper or journal or a novel in the language very difficult, and will probably avoid them. Can read and understand most mails, letters, reports and technical materials in his/her own field. The dictionary should be used a lot; helpful colleagues shall be consulted.

Can write simple letters, routine memos and routine reports but with errors. They must be checked by someone more competent. Cannot draft agreements or any materials where precision is vital – for example simple handbooks or instruction sheets.

Notes:

- 1) Level 4 , one full step up the scale, we define as "full professional proficiency". We mean that at level 4, the person should be able to function well in nearly all social and professional situations.
- 2) One might learn to function even at this level or below, by working closely with an interpreter. But this is a special skill.

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Level 2 – Limited Working Proficiency

At level 2 – limited working proficiency – it is very difficult to function alone and without immediate support. To have an effect, one must be credible as a professional. Unless the situation or the person is exceptional, at level 2 this will be almost impossible. Probably the person will feel frustrated, isolated, inadequate and unhappy.

Short Definition

Can understand and respond to simple social conversation addressed to him/her and spoken clearly. Cannot work as a professional unless with very close support – a properly qualified interpreter for example. Must often ask for repetition and simplification.

Full Definition – listening and speaking

Can understand and respond to simple social conversation addressed to him/her and spoken clearly. Must often ask for repetition and simplification. Can understand the gist of conversations between native speakers about ordinary familiar things. Can express him/herself simply and crudely and with many errors.

Can demonstrate a practical technique. Can give only simple technical instructions in his/her own field but cannot explain theoretical concepts. Any sort of public performance would be very uncomfortable for everyone. Probably the message would be garbled and the recipients at a loss.

Full Definition – reading and writing

Understands the general meaning of simple written language about ordinary familiar things. For a proper understanding of routine business mails, letters, memos, textbooks or other materials in his/her own field extensive use of a dictionary or the support of an immediate colleague is necessary.

Can write only very simple informal notes or mails, or fill in simple routine report forms, or keep a simple journal. There will be many errors.

Notes:

1) At this level one might learn to function by working closely with an interpreter. But this is a special skill. And it means being once removed from "reality". Face-to-face there is body language which may help, but it is anyway difficult to feel full respect and sympathy for someone spoken to through a third party – the interpreter.

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Level 1 – "Survival" Proficiency

At level 1 – survival proficiency – it is not possible to function socially, and certainly not professionally. One is totally inadequate. How could any professional establish the bonds of respect and affection necessary to have an effect?

Short Definition

Can understand some simple words and phrases. Can survive in the environment but cannot understand it or make him/herself understood in it.

Full Definition – listening and speaking

Understands some simple words and phrases if spoken slowly, clearly directly to him/her. Needs frequent repetition and simplification and even then will often be at a complete loss as to what is meant.

Needs the services of a qualified interpreter and must know how to use these services.

Full Definition – reading and writing

Cannot understand even the general meaning of any ordinary texts or of reports, instructions or handbooks – not even those in his/her own field. Needs full translations of texts constantly at hand.

These are the short definitions of the four language proficiency levels defined in the full page definitions

Level 5 – Native Speaker Proficiency

Can establish and maintain successful and sophisticated face-to-face and written communication in all social and professional situations.

Level 4 – Full Professional Proficiency

Can establish and maintain successful face-to-face and written communication in all ordinary social and professional situations.

Level 3 – Minimum Professional Proficiency

Can take part in ordinary social conversation with reasonable success. Can discuss practical professional matters but not very fluently or accurately; theoretical concepts will be hard.

Level 2 – Limited Working Proficiency

Can understand and respond to simple social conversation addressed to him/her and spoken clearly. Cannot work as a professional unless with very close support – a properly qualified interpreter for example. Must often ask for repetition and simplification.

Level 1 – “Survival” Proficiency

Can understand some simple words and phrases. Can survive in the environment but cannot understand it or make him/herself understood in it.