



CIOL Basic to Independent Level Language Framework

Many people hesitate to use their languages in a working or social context. Even though quite capable of some useful 'communicative' use of language, many people with school and university level skills, and even those with considerable community and heritage language skills, often choose not to volunteer them even as a part or enabler of their jobs.

There are many roles in business, the professions and government, which involve working and liaising with international customers, partners, stakeholders, subsidiaries, etc. For people who work with international customers, suppliers and officials even a modest level of language ability can make a real difference to relationships, trust and ongoing engagement. The same is also true for those working in public services which have a duty to engage with all language communities.

It is important, however, to recognise and acknowledge linguistic limitations, not put people with in difficult situations or set them up to fail and recognise the scale of risk depending on context. This is why people and organisations also need to recognise when the stakes are such that they need to use properly qualified linguists.

Understanding varying skills

It is not uncommon for basic and intermediate linguists to have significant variation in their listening, speaking, reading and writing skills. This can be as a result of their context or the way they have learned languages. Some who have learned in an academic context may have stronger reading and writing skills. Those who have learned by immersion in a family, community or workplace context may have strong listening and speaking skills and a familiarity with day-to-day vocabulary and dialects, but be less confident in producing a written output.

Frameworks of Reference

Both individuals and organisations would, therefore, be well advised to recognise and understand the different levels of independent and basic language skills as set out in the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages ([CEFR](#)) and other frameworks of reference as below. Understanding these enables different people's skill levels to be better articulated, and their uses and limits as a linguistic resource also to be better understood.

Frameworks of reference are important to unlocking basic and intermediate language use by individuals, and within organisations; hence the Chartered Institute of Linguists setting out this overarching framework which captures the CEFR and other scales as they apply to linguists at these levels.

The Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR)

The Common European Framework of Reference for Languages ([CEFR](#)) set out by the Council of Europe is perhaps the most widely recognised international framework.

For the world of work, 'Independent User' can be a useful level of linguistic competence, which with use will only improve over time and become increasingly valuable and advantageous to individuals and organisations. CEFR 'Basic User' language skills can also bring value in basic communication, interaction and work with people who speak another language.

BASIC USER	A1	Can understand and use familiar everyday expressions and very basic phrases aimed at the satisfaction of needs of a concrete type. Can introduce him/herself and others and can ask and answer questions about personal details such as where he/she lives, people he/she knows and things he/she has. Can interact in a simple way provided the other person talks slowly and clearly and is prepared to help.
	A2	Can understand sentences and frequently used expressions related to areas of most immediate relevance (e.g. very basic personal and family information, shopping, local geography, employment). Can communicate in simple and routine tasks requiring a simple and direct exchange of information on familiar and routine matters. Can describe in simple terms aspects of his/her background, immediate environment and matters in areas of immediate need.
INDEPENDENT USER	B1	Can understand the main points of clear standard input on familiar matters regularly encountered in work, school, leisure, etc. Can deal with most situations likely to arise whilst travelling in an area where the language is spoken. Can produce simple connected text on topics which are familiar or of personal interest. Can describe experiences and events, dreams, hopes & ambitions and briefly give reasons and explanations for opinions and plans.
	B2	Can understand the main ideas of complex text on both concrete and abstract topics, including technical discussions in his/her field of specialisation. Can interact with a degree of fluency and spontaneity that makes regular interaction with native speakers quite possible without strain for either party. Can produce clear, detailed text on a wide range of subjects and explain a viewpoint on a topical issue giving the advantages and disadvantages of various options.

United Nations

The [United Nations](#) describes their equivalent 'Basic' and 'Independent' as follows:

UN Level I: Basic Language Competence - *Uses the language in a simple manner, in non-demanding everyday contexts and situations, when dealing with routine or predictable matters in personal, public and professional domains. Shows basic linguistic competence and uses a restricted range of social language conventions to meet simple communication needs. Shows limited facility in understanding if an action or response is required and some autonomy to respond. Usually requires reference resources and models, templates or external help to prepare in advance, check understanding or repair communication.*

Reading – Understands the main message and finds specific information, often with the help of visuals or background knowledge, in straightforward and clearly written factual texts of a limited variety of different genres.

Listening – Understands 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 repetitions or reformulation.

Speaking – Participates with some effort in simple, brief and routine exchanges, often requiring the help of the interlocutor. Produces simple, previously prepared, brief spoken texts.

Writing – Writes or drafts short simple texts, notes and messages, and produces longer texts with the help of a variety of resources and tools. Writes and responds to simple everyday correspondence.

UN Level II: Intermediate Language Competence - *Uses the language with moderate fluency and accuracy, in everyday contexts and situations, when dealing with ordinary or general matters in the personal, public and professional domains. Shows an appropriate command of a moderate range of linguistic and pragmatic competences and of social language conventions to meet ordinary general communication needs. Understands if any action or response is required and shows adequate autonomy to respond. Often requires reference resources and models or external help to prepare in advance, check understanding and improve or support communication.*

Reading – Understands the general meaning, and identifies the main conclusions and the most relevant details in straightforward, clearly written factual texts of different genres.

Listening – Understands the general meaning and identifies 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.



Speaking – Takes part with ease in routine interactions, making statements and expressing personal opinions. Produces, with or without previous preparation, short to medium length spoken texts. Relays the key points contained in an oral or written communication.

Writing – Writes or drafts short texts in different genres on concrete matters. In written exchanges, respond appropriately using writing conventions. Relays the key points contained in an oral or written communication.

Interagency Language Roundtable (ILR)

Widely recognised in the USA, similar to the UN scale and also mirrored by [NATO](#) and other international organisations, the Interagency Language Roundtable ([ILR](#)) is an unfunded Federal interagency organisation established for the coordination and sharing of information about language-related activities at the US Federal and national level.

One advantage of ILR-based scales, when applied in a working context, is they have quite fine gradations within them:

ILR Levels	Broad read across to CEFR
0 (No Proficiency)	A1
0+ (Memorized Proficiency)	
1 (Elementary Proficiency)	A2
1+ (Elementary Proficiency, Plus)	
2 (Limited Working Proficiency)	B1
2+ (Limited Working Proficiency, Plus)	
3 (General Professional Proficiency)	B2/C1
3+ (General Professional Proficiency, Plus)	
4 (Advanced Professional Proficiency)	C1/C2
4+ (Advanced Professional Proficiency, Plus)	
5 (Functionally Native Proficiency)	C2+

Another feature of ILR based scales is they commonly highlight the four main different skills of [listening](#), [speaking](#), [reading](#) and [writing](#), enabling language users/learners to have a precise and descriptive profile in a four digit numeric format: i.e. 2,2+,2,1 for example, which would indicate a person with overall lower level ‘independent’ language skills and thus some capacity to operate autonomously in the language overall, but with stronger skills in speaking and less strong skills in writing.

This precision, in part, explains the popularity of ILR based scales in some high-stakes working environments (Armed Forces etc) where finer differences can have significant consequences.

Broad read-across to UK qualifications

Whilst comparisons cannot be exact given the purposes and measurement criteria are different, and different qualification grades within qualifications span a wide range of levels, a very broad read across between international frameworks and UK qualifications is set out below.

UK Qualification	CEFR	UK RQF Level	UN Equivalent	ILR
GCSE	A1/A2+	Level 2	Basic	0-1
A Level	A2/B1+	Level 3	Basic/Intermediate	1-3
Degree	B2/C1	Level 6	Intermediate	3-4