



What are language competencies?

Language competencies can be active or passive and are frequently separated into four inter-related skills:

- Listening
- Reading
- Speaking
- Writing

The required level of competency in any given skill varies in relation to the work task. In 'English Language as a Barrier to Employment, Training and Education' (DfEE March 2001) Dr. Philida Schellekens states that 'the minimum level of language competence required' for employment should be 'NVQ 3'. She goes on to say that 'jobs with high communication content and use of formal language should be pitched at Level 4 or 5' At NVQ levels 1 and 2 there is a detailed National Curriculum available and widely used by ESOL practitioners in further and higher education. The English Assessment Toolkit produced by the Birmingham Core Skills Development Partnership in 1999 developed competencies up to level 5. The National Standards for Interpreting and Translating describe competencies at Level 4 and 5 (see Resource Pack). There are no national standards for describing competence in Mother Tongue, however the English language competencies could be used as a guide or tailor-made to meet the needs of different languages.

A language skills (English and Mother Tongue) audit across public service would be beneficial and would greatly enhance the human resources knowledge base of staff skills and could form the basis of a development plan.

Skills Benchmarking

There will be consequences of workplace language skills audit and careful job analysis. Existing staff may wish to upgrade their language skills with Continuing Professional Development. Others may undertake language training in new areas. Whilst CPD workshops could be delivered in-house, it would be advisable for staff to access existing external programmes e.g. GCSE, university short courses, IELTS or commission customised courses from experienced language providers, such as universities.

In order to assist Human Resources Personnel and Managers to assess and identify where language competency is an issue the following checklist of competencies has been prepared.

Job Title	Activity	Language Skills	Level*
Multi-lingual Front Line Staff	Talking to the public (face to face and on the telephone)	Listening Speaking Reading Writing	Advanced / 4 Advanced / 4 Intermediate / 3 Elementary / 2
Multi-lingual Professionals	Giving professional advice. Writing and reading	Listening Speaking Reading Writing	Advanced / 4 Advanced / 4 Advanced / 4 Advanced / 4
Advocates	Advocating on behalf of clients	Listening Speaking Reading Writing	Advanced / 4 Advanced / 4 Intermediate / 3 Intermediate / 3
Interpreters	Interpreting between clients and service providers	Listening Speaking Reading Writing	Advanced / 4 Advanced / 4 Advanced / 4 Advanced / 4
* Level refer to National Vocational Qualifications equivalent			

A detailed breakdown of the language competencies for interpreters at Level 4 and 5 can be found in the National Standards (see Resource Pack). An analysis for the language functions in other roles would need to be carried out before drawing up a comprehensive checklist for the other job roles.