



NRS Tips: NRS Educational Functioning Level Descriptors for English as a Second Language

Introduction

Beginning July 1, 2025, States must use assessments aligned to the appropriate National Reporting System (NRS) educational functional level descriptors (EFL) for English as a Second Language (ESL).

New EFL descriptors for ESL were released in 2017 that align with the [English Language Proficiency \(ELP\) Standards for Adult Education \(AE\)](#) published in 2016. Like the previous descriptors, the new versions describe the most critical concepts and skills for each EFL. Although these descriptors were made public in 2017 and included in the Adult Education and Family Literacy Act information collection (OMB control number 1830-0027), they could not be implemented until the U.S. Secretary of Education determined that at least one assessment was aligned with these descriptors and suitable for use in the NRS.¹ This document summarizes the key features of the EFL descriptors for ESL and provides background information on why and how the descriptors were developed.

Key Features

The NRS EFL descriptors for ESL:

- ✓ Address the most critical concepts for the assessment of adult learners.
- ✓ Follow the progression of the ELP standards.
- ✓ Promote and support the development of learners' academic content knowledge to facilitate the transition from ESL to Adult Basic Education in the AE program.
- ✓ Are organized into three modalities: interpretive, productive, and interactive. These modalities include the domains of reading, writing, speaking, and listening. The modalities allow for an integrated or holistic approach to teaching and assessing English learners (ELs) in an AE setting. Exhibit 1 provides an example of the NRS EFL Descriptors for High Beginning ESL and High Intermediate ESL organized by modality.

Exhibit 1. Examples of the NRS EFL Descriptors for High Beginning ESL and High Intermediate ESL

Modality	High Beginning ESL	High Intermediate ESL
Interpretive	ELs ready to exit [this level can] identify the main topic in oral presentations and simple spoken and written texts and retell a few key details using an emerging set of strategies.	ELs ready to exit [this level can] determine a central idea or theme in oral presentations and spoken and written texts using an increasing range of strategies. They can analyze the development of the themes/ideas, cite specific details and evidence from texts to support the analysis, and summarize a text.

Modality	High Beginning ESL	High Intermediate ESL
Productive	ELs ready to exit this level [can], with support, deliver short oral presentations and compose simple written narratives or informational texts about familiar texts, topics, experiences, or events.	ELs ready to exit this level [can] deliver oral presentations and compose written informational texts about a variety of texts, topics, or events. This includes developing the topic with some relevant details, concepts, examples, and information and integrating graphics or multimedia when appropriate.
Interactive	ELs ready to exit this level [can] participate in conversations and written exchanges about familiar topics and texts. They can present information and ideas, appropriately take turns in interactions with others, and respond to simple questions and wh- questions.	ELs ready to exit this level [can] participate in conversations, discussions, and written exchanges about a range of topics, texts, and issues. They can build on the ideas of others,

Detailed descriptions of all the NRS EFL descriptors for ESL can be found in Appendix B of the [Technical Assistance Guide for Performance Accountability under the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act](#).

Why Did the EFL Descriptors Change?

In early 2016, the American Institutes for Research (AIR) convened an independent expert panel to identify a set of ELP Standards for AE by reviewing existing ELP Standards for kindergarten through Grade 12 and selecting those that were most applicable for adult learners. The ELP Standards comprise 10 anchor standards that pinpoint the skills that ELs need to master to successfully engage with standards-based academic content (English language arts/literacy and mathematics). The new ELP Standards were released in November 2016 for states to voluntarily adopt or adapt.

AIR then convened a second panel to assess the alignment of the existing NRS EFL descriptors for ESL and the NRS-approved assessments to the new standards. Overall, few EFLs and assessments were found to align with the standards, and most were non-aligned. Therefore, the existing EFL descriptors were updated to correspond to the learning that is expected for each educational level as guided by the ELP Standards for AE. The updated descriptors, written by a third panel of subject matter experts and reviewed by a fourth, correspond to the learning expected for each educational functioning level as guided by the ELP Standards.

On March 18, 2024, the Office of Career, Technical, and Adult Education published a notice in the Federal Register announcing a list of tests States and local eligible providers may continue to use until June 30, 2025. At that time, the ESL educational functioning level descriptors to which those ESL tests are aligned will be retired. For program year 2024, which begins on July 1, 2024, and ends on June 30, 2025, both the previous and new ESL educational functioning level descriptors will be in effect. States must use an ESL assessment that is aligned to the appropriate ESL educational functioning level descriptors.ⁱⁱ

ⁱ <https://nrsweb.org/sites/default/files/NRS-TA-April2024-508.pdf>

ⁱⁱ <https://www.federalregister.gov/d/2024-05679>