

# INTERAGENCY LANGUAGE ROUNDTABLE SKILL LEVEL DESCRIPTIONS FOR COMPETENCE IN INTERCULTURAL COMMUNICATION



## **Preface**

These Skill Level Descriptions are intended to serve primarily as guidelines for use in government settings. They may provide a basis for curriculum development, instruction and assessment.

Intercultural communication is a complex activity that combines several abilities and incorporates both cross-cultural expertise and language skills. For the purposes of this document, the term refers to the content and form of communication, both verbal and nonverbal, among people of different cultures. Competence in intercultural communication is the ability to take part effectively in a given social context by understanding what is being communicated and by employing appropriate language and behavior to convey an intended message.

Knowledge and understanding of some extralinguistic elements may be acquired through independent research, regional studies, or educational programs that include coursework in such disciplines as anthropology,

history, religion, politics, psychology, sociology, sociolinguistics, economics, communication, literature, and the arts. However, control of a full range of nonverbal responses to social cues is typically unattainable without extended immersion in the culture.

A given level of competence in Intercultural Communication requires a corresponding level in language proficiency. But language proficiency and cultural knowledge, skills and abilities do not always align. Any such differences may impact the effectiveness of intercultural communication. Moreover, having different levels of ability in the various language skills (Speaking, Listening, Reading and Writing) may also hinder performance in intercultural communication.

Finally, it must be noted that any successful communication, but particularly intercultural communication, is generally dependent on interpersonal skills, disposition, social flexibility, tolerance for ambiguity, and ability to cope with cultural dissonance.

The Skill Level Descriptions for Intercultural Communication that follow are generic, as with all other ILR Descriptions. Culture-specific models should be developed for assessment and instructional purposes.

The Descriptions characterize competence in Intercultural Communication for the six base levels and the 0+ level of the ILR scale.

Each level implies control of all functions at the levels below it. Except for the 0+ level, no plus levels are characterized.

Below Level 3, common everyday situations and interactions provide the primary content and context domains, including use of voicemail, email and social media. At Level 3, the Descriptions expand to include the domains of business and other professional settings. At Level 4 and above, successful participation in the full range of social, professional and cultural interactions is achieved.



## **Level 0: (No Competence)**

Unable to adjust when faced with cultural differences, and shows little or no awareness that such exist.



## **Level 0+: (Memorized Competence)**

Able to use rehearsed behavior and memorized utterances to engage in a few routine interactions serving basic survival needs. Shows awareness of obvious differences between the culture and the individual's own, and avoids some of the most critical and noticeable taboos, although not consistently. Can use appropriate posture and behavior when acknowledging and delivering short polite exchanges, such as greetings, farewells, and expressions of thanks and apology, but can rarely cope with deviations from the routine. May often miss cues indicating miscommunication and is almost always unable to repair misunderstandings when they occur.

## **Level 1: (Elementary Competence)**

Able to participate in some everyday interactions, though not always acceptably. Recognizes that differences exist between behaviors, norms and values of the individual's own culture and those of the other culture, but shows little understanding of the significance or nature of these differences. May understand the need to manage own reactions to cultural surprises, but is often unable to do so appropriately. Avoids well-known taboo topics and behavior, and normally observes basic courtesy requirements in encounters with individuals of different gender, age, or status. Can generally conform to culturally prescribed practices during interactions, such as those regarding posture, eye contact, and distance from others, and observe rules governing personal appearance and attire. Exhibits emerging ability to participate in some social media activities. Usually responds appropriately to the most

commonly used cultural cues but may exhibit confusion when faced with unfamiliar ones and can rarely cope if misunderstandings arise. Typically experiences difficulties with less predictable and spontaneous interactions, such as open-ended conversations or bargaining.

## **Level 2 (Limited Working Competence)**

Able to participate acceptably in many everyday social and work-related interactions. Shows conscious awareness of significant differences between the individual's own culture and the other culture and attempts to adjust behavior accordingly, although not always successfully. Can typically avoid taboos and adhere to basic social norms and rules of etiquette, such as in accepting and refusing invitations, offering and receiving gifts, and requesting assistance. May sometimes misinterpret cultural cues or behave inappropriately for the culture, but is usually able to recognize and repair misunderstandings. Understands the need to manage own attitudes and reactions to cultural dissonance, and is usually able to do so. Normally functions as expected in predictable and commonly encountered situations, including public events and large gatherings, but may have difficulty when faced with less familiar circumstances. Able to participate in various social media activities. In a work environment, can appropriately issue straightforward directions and instructions, give or receive orders, whether in person, on the telephone, or in writing, and may be able to address some job-related problems. In some instances, demonstrates recognition of and makes appropriate reference to issues and topics that are customarily the subject of conversation, such as historical, cultural or current events.



## **Level 3 (Professional Competence)**

Able to participate successfully in most social, practical, and professional interactions, including those that may require a range of formal and informal language and behavior. Can adapt to a variety of individuals and groups

without being misconstrued and transition smoothly from informal to formal styles of communication. Controls nonverbal responses, such as gestures, and handles unfamiliar situations appropriately, including those involving taboos or emotionally-charged subjects. Rarely misreads cultural cues, and can almost always repair misinterpretations. Can understand and make appropriate use of cultural references and expressions, and can usually discuss a variety of issues and subject matter that refer to the culture, such as history, politics, literature, and the arts. Can interpret reading materials and recognize subtleties, implications, and tone. Able to communicate via social media. In professional contexts, the individual can interact appropriately during meetings and provide detailed explanations or reports both in person and in writing. Social behavior and interactions reflect significant knowledge and understanding of cultural expectations.

#### **Level 4 (Advanced Professional Competence)**

Able to participate successfully in virtually all social, professional, and official interactions, including those where leadership is required. Controls the full range of formal and informal styles of language and behavior. Responds effectively to verbal and nonverbal forms of communication, and almost always correctly interprets visual cues, cultural allusions, nuance, tone, and subtle manifestations of underlying values. Can effectively employ, both in person and in writing, a wide variety of sophisticated communicative strategies to command, argue, persuade, dissuade, negotiate, counsel, and show empathy. Can take part successfully in public discourse, such as presentations, conferences, speeches, and media interviews. Can use intercultural communicative skills to facilitate information exchanges in a variety of situations. Makes frequent and appropriate use of cultural references, literary allusions, quotations from literature and other significant documents, and can discuss in depth the culture's traditions, beliefs, history, national policies, and public issues.

## **Level 5 (Superior Professional Competence)**

The individual has mastered and controls virtually all forms of intercultural communication. Can deal skillfully with a very extensive range of circumstances, including high-stress situations. Recognizes and understands the intended meaning of a very wide variety of colloquialisms, regionalisms, slang, and pertinent cultural references. Able to analyze, debate, and synthesize the most creative expressions of language and aesthetics, as well as the concepts, values and standards that constitute the fundamental underpinnings of the culture.

**Approved by the Interagency Language Roundtable Friday, May 18, 2012.**