

Development of the Proficiency Descriptors Framework for the Teaching, Learning and Assessment of Mother Tongue Languages in Singapore

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Abstract

A Mother Tongue Languages (MTL) Review Committee was set up in January 2010 to propose strategies to enhance the teaching, learning and assessment of MTL in Singapore. With the aim to nurture ‘active learners and proficient users’ of MTL, the committee recommended the implementation of a proficiency-oriented curriculum. Central to the proficiency-oriented approach is the development of a set of proficiency descriptors that explicitly spell out the six core language skills (Reading, Listening, Speaking, Spoken Interaction, Writing and Written Interaction) and levels of attainment at key stages of learning. To facilitate implementation, the overall proficiency descriptors will be unpacked into various ‘Can Do’ statements. Language competencies (i.e. language knowledge, language skills and strategies), which students will systematically learn through the MTL courses, have also been identified. To help teachers establish a common understanding about the descriptors, exemplars were developed and focus group discussions were conducted. This paper shares some of the experiences and learning from the process of developing the proficiency descriptors.

Keywords: Proficiency Descriptors, Language Competencies, Language Knowledge, Language Skills and strategies, Can Do statements

Introduction

Language policy has always been an important issue in Singapore. In 2004, Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong stated that language policy “concerns such fundamental issues as how we ensure survival of our society, and have confidence and identity to chart our future” (Tan C. , 2006). As a multi-ethnic and multilingual city-state that achieved independence in 1965, Singapore adopted a language policy where there are four “official languages” (English, Mandarin, Malay, Tamil), in recognition of the major ethnic groups that form our society. English serves as the common language of government, administration and trade, and is frequently referred to as the “working language”.

Singapore’s bilingual policy, first implemented in 1966, requires that each child learns two languages, i.e. English and his/her “Mother Tongue”. English is used as the medium of instruction and learning for nearly all content subjects¹, while the other official languages, designated as “Mother Tongue Languages (MTL)”, are mainly taught and learnt as language subjects. English, as a common language of instruction, enables our students to plug themselves easily into the global economy and access knowledge and technical know-how of the western world. The learning of MTL provides a link to their heritage and Asian

¹ A small number of subjects, such as Character and Citizenship Education in primary schools, are taught in Mother Tongue.

roots for the various ethnic groups. Therefore, the mother tongue language is assigned according to the ethnicity of the children, i.e. Malay for the Malays and the Eurasians, Mandarin for the Chinese, and Tamil for all the Indians, regardless of their home languages (Gopinathan S., Ho, Wah Kam & V. Saravanan, 2004). Even as we uphold the vital role of bilingualism in our education system, the Ministry of Education (Singapore) (MOE) is mindful of the need to continually update its language policies and curriculum to be responsive to the changing landscape within and beyond Singapore. Therefore, the teaching of MTL has been the subject of several major reviews over the years, with the latest conducted in 2010.

In January 2010, MOE formed the Mother Tongue Languages Review Committee (MTLRC) led by the Director-General of Education to evaluate the teaching and learning of MTL in Singapore. The goal of the committee was to “propose appropriate strategies for the MTL teaching, learning and assessment, given Singapore’s unique context, that would promote the use of MTL as a living language among our students” (MOE, 2011). In January 2011, the committee submitted its recommendations to nurture “Proficient Users” and “Active Learners” of MTL, and the recommendations were approved by the Cabinet in the same month for implementation (The Straits Times, 2011).

One of the key recommendations of the MTLRC was to adopt the use of “Proficiency Descriptors” to “more explicitly spell out the language skills and levels of attainment our students should achieve at various key stages of learning” (MOE, 2011). The committee in its scan of the global language teaching environment, found that “to guide teaching and testing, experts (from around the world) agree on the sound educational principle of stating clear expectations of what learners can master at different stages of learning” (MOE, 2011). As such, the Proficiency Descriptors developed by MOE are expected to serve the following purposes:

- Explicitly spell out the language skills and levels of attainment Singaporean learners of MTL should achieve at various stages;
- Help teachers tailor their teaching, classroom activities and assessments to create more opportunities for students to practice and use their MTL in specific ways; and
- Motivate students to progress from one proficiency level to the next by stating clearly the expectations of each level.

(MOE, 2011)

The development of the MTL Proficiency Descriptors started in 2011. It was undertaken by the Curriculum Planning and Development Division (CPDD) of MOE, Mother Tongue Languages Branch (MTLB), in collaboration with the Singapore Examinations and Assessment Board (SEAB). The Mother Tongue Languages Review Committee Report (2011) required that the descriptors be validated through empirical research and data by SEAB, and that training be provided for teachers on its use.

Purpose and Principles of the MTL Proficiency Descriptors

There is a diverse profile of students learning the Mother Tongue Languages. Learner differences, such as in their aptitude for language learning and home language environment, interact in complex ways. Therefore, differentiated MTL courses and instructional approaches have been developed to cater for this diversity, as seen in [Table 1](#) below.

Language	Primary (Yr 1 – 6)	Secondary (Yr 7 – 10)	Junior College (Yr 11&12)
Chinese	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Higher Chinese • Standard Chinese • Foundation Chinese (available at P5-6) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Higher Chinese • Chinese (Express Stream) • Chinese (Normal Academic Stream) • Basic Chinese (Normal Technical Stream) • Chinese ‘B’ (‘O’levels) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • H2 Chinese Language and Literature • H1 Chinese • Chinese ‘B’ (‘A’levels)
Malay	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Higher Malay • Standard Malay • Foundation Malay (available at P5-6) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Higher Malay • Malay (Express Stream) • Malay (Normal Academic Stream) • Basic Malay (Normal Technical Stream) • Malay ‘B’ (‘O’levels) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • H2 Malay Language and Literature • H1 Malay • Malay ‘B’ (‘A’levels)
Tamil	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Higher Tamil • Standard Tamil • Foundation Tamil (available at P5-6) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Higher Tamil • Tamil (Express Stream) • Tamil (Normal Academic Stream) • Basic Tamil (Normal Technical Stream) • Tamil ‘B’ (‘O’levels) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • H2 Tamil Language and Literature • H1 Tamil • Tamil ‘B’ (‘A’levels)

Table 1: Differentiated MTL courses in Singapore

The MTL Proficiency Descriptors aims to unite under one common scale, the learning of different languages in different streams over the course of 12 years (Primary 1 to Junior College 2nd year), allowing for comparability not only across different streams and levels, but also between languages. The difference between streams and courses are reflected through differences in the relative pace of progression (for example, a P6 HMTL student is deemed to be at level 5, while a P6 MTL student at level 4). It should be noted that although there are 9 levels of “progression”, the top levels represent the “pinnacle” of MTL proficiency in Singapore, and applies only to the group of students who are particularly talented in the MTL. Most students are expected to reach between level 7 and level 8 by the time they exit mainstream schools (end of Secondary or JC).

The Proficiency Descriptors outlines what language learners can do by describing the kinds of language performances that they can demonstrate through contextualized language tasks by the end of each proficiency level. The language tasks are grouped into three categories comprising six language skills (See [Figure 1](#)).

For the receptive skills (listening and reading), learners will need to understand the use of various types of spoken and written texts for different purposes. For the productive skills (speaking and writing), they are required to produce a variety of spoken and written texts for different purposes. For the interaction skills (spoken interaction and written interaction), they will need to be able to communicate through oral and written exchanges in different contexts.

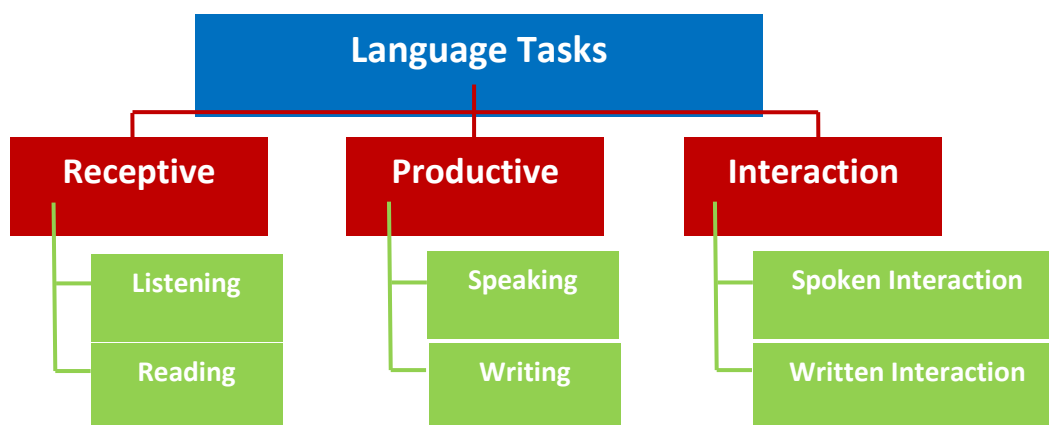


Figure 1: The Language Task Categories

The Proficiency Descriptors hence provide a common reference point and a map of progression for considering, describing and evaluating learners’ achievements across all the different MTL courses. The use of Proficiency Descriptors will help learners, teachers, curriculum planners and assessment officers to situate and co-ordinate their efforts, thus ensuring alignment in the teaching, learning and assessment of MTL (See Figure 2).

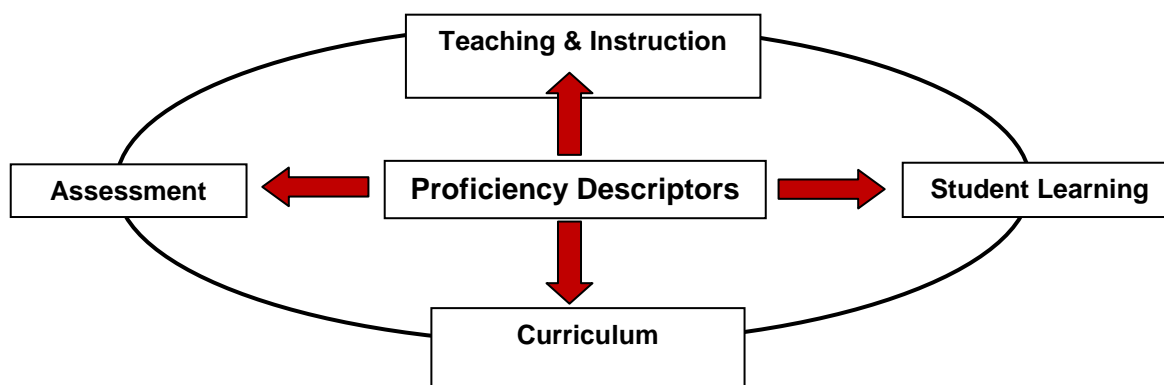


Figure 2: Aligning Curriculum, Teaching, Learning and Assessment to Achieve Proficiency

In order to fulfil their purpose and uses, the Proficiency Descriptors must be transparent, relevant and realistic.

Transparent: The Proficiency Descriptors must be clearly articulated and explicit, and be readily available and comprehensible to users. This is achieved by framing specifically what students “can do” and by providing exemplars illustrating the typical features of the respective language skills for each level.

Relevant: The Proficiency Descriptors must focus on the use of language skills in real life situations so that learners can appreciate how the learning of the language in class can help them accomplish tasks that they can expect to encounter in everyday life. This is achieved by using authentic language tasks and activities (e.g., conversations, oral presentations and

responding to emails) to demonstrate the use of language in meaningful contexts.

Realistic: The Proficiency Descriptors must be pegged at a reasonable standard that is attainable by learners at different starting points and with different learning needs, after they have put in continuous and dedicated effort over a period of time. This is achieved by validating the descriptors using performance tests and surveys to ascertain the relative pegging of standards across the different MTL courses.

Development of the MTL Proficiency Descriptors

The development of the MTL Proficiency Descriptors is undertaken by a team of Chinese, Malay and Tamil curriculum officers at CPPD-MTLB, in collaboration with academics from local and overseas institutions. In consideration of the various complexities to describing MTL proficiency in Singapore, the team decided to draw upon different language proficiency frameworks in developing the MTL Proficiency Descriptors. Some of the language proficiency frameworks that were looked at more closely by the team include the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR), the American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages (ACTFL) Proficiency Guidelines, the Common Core State Standards and the New Zealand Reading and Writing Standards.

The approach taken in developing the proficiency descriptors is an iterative one. First, the existing literature with regard to the teaching of Mother Tongue Languages in Singapore, including textbooks, resource material, assessment, student results, and public commentary on standards were reviewed, and a draft set of Descriptors crafted. The draft Descriptors were then tested on different stakeholders including curriculum officers, educational leaders and practitioners to assess their clarity and applicability. With inputs from the various stakeholders, the Proficiency Descriptors were then further refined and tested. After the framing of the Descriptors became stable, tasks were designed based on the Proficiency Descriptors for validation.

In addition, based on the Proficiency Descriptors, a wide range of students' work was collected to distil exemplars for the different levels. Focus Group Discussion sessions using both the Descriptors and the exemplars were conducted to ascertain teachers' receptiveness and understanding of the Descriptors. Results from the validation exercises and Focus Group Discussions were then used to further refine the Descriptors.

In the course of the development, the number of proficiency levels was reduced from the originally envisioned ten to nine, and the Proficiency Descriptors were split into different components, comprising Overall Descriptors, Can-Do Statements, and Language Competencies:

- (1) Overall Proficiency Descriptors describe the context, organization, vocabulary, grammar and speech qualities that are associated with the tasks for all the different dimensions².
- (2) Can-Do Statements describe what learners can do with each language skill. These statements are further unpacked into several dimensions based primarily on the purpose for which language is being used.

An example of the Overall Proficiency Descriptors and Can-Do statements for Level 4 Reading is in Table 2 below.

Level 4 Reading	
Overall Language Proficiency Descriptors	I can understand written texts on topics related to self, family, school and community. The texts employ <u>common organizational structures</u> , use basic vocabulary and common sentence structures.
Can-Do statements Understand a variety of written texts for different purposes	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Narrate, describe (Narrative) I can understand written texts and <u>how most details</u> come together to form the theme. I can <u>evaluate</u> actions of characters. 2. Inform, explain (Informative) I can understand information and <u>details</u> in written texts. 3. Express views (Persuasive) I can understand the author's opinion and reasons in written texts.

Table 2: Example of Overall Proficiency Descriptors and Can-Do Statements

- (3) Language Competencies refer to the system of language knowledge, skills and strategies that enables learners and users to perform language tasks. The Language Competencies are unique for each Mother Tongue Language described. An example of Language Competencies for textual knowledge for Chinese Language is in Table 3 below.

	L1	L2	L3	L4	L5	L6	L7	L8	L9
Text Layout & Features									
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Identify print concepts and use them to support comprehension of texts <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ <i>titles, content page, author, cover, headlines, sub-headings</i> ○ <i>illustrations and captions (e.g., pictures, diagrams, maps, tables, charts, graphs, legends etc)</i> • Distinguish different text types (e.g., narrative, informative, persuasive etc) <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ <i>Identify the purpose</i> ○ <i>Analyze text structures/organization (e.g., sequence, causation comparison, problem/solution)</i> 									

² These dimensions include narrative, informative, persuasive, converse, correspond, transaction and discussion. The dimensions are different for the different language skills, e.g., reading is unpacked into narrative, informative, persuasive; spoken interaction is unpacked into converse, transaction and discussion.

- *Aware of language features*

Shading indicates when a language knowledge or skill and strategy will be formally introduced and taught. Subsequently, the language knowledge or skill and strategy must be revisited, reinforced and taught at increasing levels of difficulty, until the learners have mastery of it.

Table 3: Example of Language Competencies for Textual Knowledge for Chinese Language

Validation of the MTL Proficiency Descriptors

Validation of the MTL Proficiency Descriptors followed a two-pronged approach. Quantitative data of students' performance was collected by SEAB and interpreted against the Descriptors, with refinements made where necessary. Figure 3 below outlines the validation process:

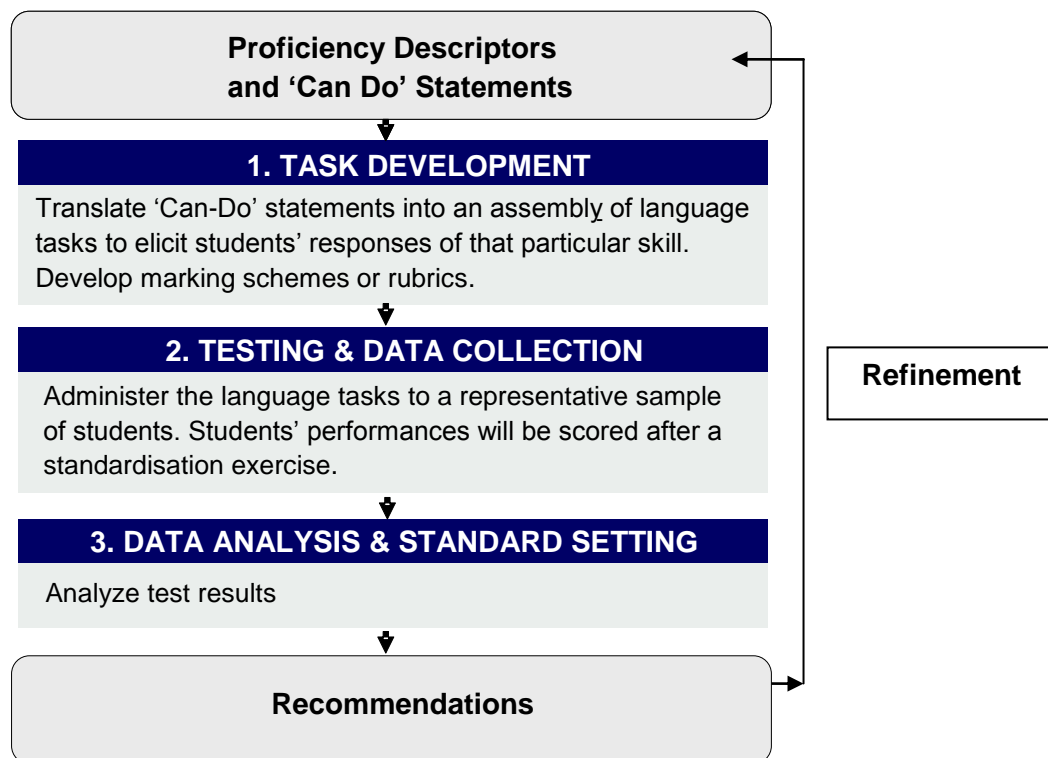


Figure 3: Validation process of the MTL Proficiency Descriptors

In addition, CPDD officers gathered qualitative inputs from practitioners. A total of 36 Focus Group Discussion sessions were conducted in 2013 to elicit teachers' perceptions on the Proficiency Descriptors exemplars pegged at the respective levels. Data such as teachers' reasons on why they peg exemplars at the respective levels were collected to provide some reference to the appropriateness of the levels. A total of 64 teachers from different school types (Mission schools, Government and Government Aided Schools) and levels (Primary, Secondary & JC) participated in the discussion.

Building Shared Understanding

The aims of the MTL Proficiency Descriptors are to help learners, teachers, curriculum planners and assessment officers have a common reference for setting

expectations and gauging attainments, thus ensuring alignment in the teaching, learning and assessment of MTL

In order for the Proficiency Descriptors to achieve its mandate, it is imperative to build shared understanding amongst the various stakeholders. One important area to look at is teachers' understanding and adoption of the descriptors in the classroom. Hargreaves (1991) notes that "the teacher is the ultimate key to educational change", because "(t)eachers don't merely deliver the curriculum. They develop it, define it and reinterpret it too. It is what teachers think, what teachers believe and what teachers do at the level of the classroom that ultimately shapes the kind of learning that young people get" (Hargreaves, 1991)

Remillard (2005) noted that teachers show great variance in how they use curricula. In a study, Shkedi (1995) showed that teachers make only limited use of curriculum guides. Furthermore, Sherin and Drake (2009) pointed out that even in situations where teachers believe themselves to be implementing reform, some may have only incorporated surface features, or even made "lethal mutations" that results in the goals of the curriculum being no longer maintained. This possibly is because, as Olson (1983) noted, curriculum writers and teachers communicate using two different languages despite using similar vocabularies. He explains that curriculum writers, due to the theoretical nature of their work, tend to assign meanings to terms that teachers have difficulty understanding (Olson, 1983). Negishi, Takada and Tono (2011) also noted in their development of CEFR-J that "teachers read their own assumptions of language teaching and learning into descriptors".

It is thus important to bridge the gap between curriculum writers and practitioners. The development of exemplars aims to serve this purpose. Focus Group Discussion sessions using both the Descriptors and the exemplars were conducted to gather feedback on teachers' views and reasons on the pegging of exemplars at the respective levels.

Teachers were divided into 6 groups according to the levels (Primary, Secondary & JC) they teach and each group was given a set of exemplars arranged in random order of proficiency levels. The teachers were asked to determine the level of each exemplar based on the tasks and descriptors. For example, the group of Primary school teachers were given a written interaction exemplar showing an email response task (See [Figure 4](#)). After considering the difficulty level of the task and the student's response, they would peg the exemplar to a proficiency level. They were then asked to explain the reasons for their judgement. With feedback from the teachers (and quantitative data from SEAB), the proficiency descriptors and exemplars were further refined.

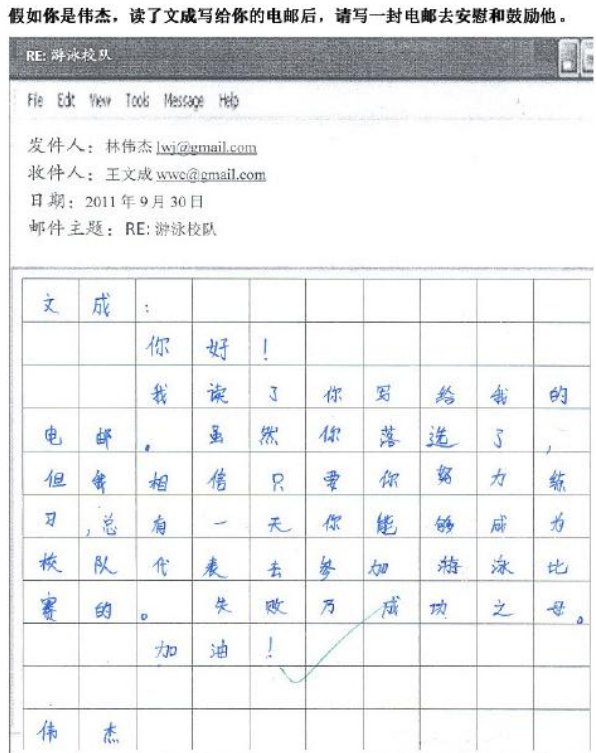
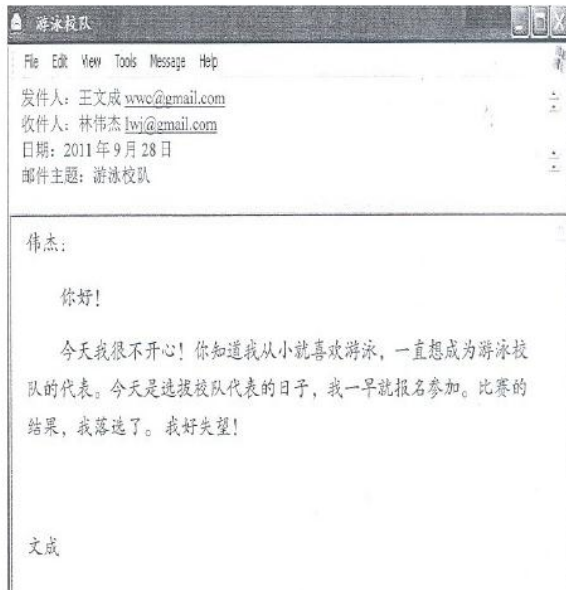


Figure 4: Example of a Written Interaction Exemplar

Conclusion

Globally, standards-based approaches using frameworks and benchmarks have become more widely used in language learning and assessment. The reference levels in these frameworks acknowledge different learning progressions and give more meaning to the achievement of individual language users. Learning from these systems, it is necessary to state clear expectations of what learners can master at different stages of learning to account for the progressive nature of MTL teaching, learning and testing. The MTL Proficiency Descriptors and exemplars were completed with key stages validated. The new MTL syllabi and curriculum to be implemented in 2015 will be developed in alignment with the Proficiency Descriptors. Moving forward, the linkage between assessment and the Proficiency Descriptors would be examined, and further validation of other proficiency levels would be conducted. There will be continuous efforts to further refine the Proficiency Descriptors.

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