

Evidence for the greater ease of use of the ILR language skill level descriptions for speaking

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Introduction. In this article I address possible reasons that the *U.S. Government's Interagency Language Roundtable's (ILR's) Language Skill Level Descriptions for Speaking* may be more readily usable than those for the other ILR skill modalities: Writing, Listening, and Reading. Three types of reasons are cited: historical, anecdotal, and empirical. The speaking descriptions,² both with and without its example sections, are compared to those for the other three ILR skill modalities; and the conclusion is drawn that strong reasons exist in support of the greater ease of use of the speaking descriptions. A similar study should be conducted for the related ACTFL/ETS guidelines, but that must await another article in part because the ACTFL/ETS descriptions are currently under revision for all four skill modalities.³

Why do the U.S. Government's Interagency Language Roundtable (ILR) Skill Level Descriptions for speaking seem more readily usable than those for the other ILR skill modalities? Besides greater frequency of use, there are historical, anecdotal, and empirical reasons that can be marshaled in explanation.

Historical reasons. In the mid-1950s, when the Foreign Service Institute (FSI) of the U.S. Department of State first devised what are now referred to as the *U.S. Government's ILR Language Skill Level Descriptions*, Speaking was the skill modality most in need of description and assessment. Academia lacked suitable approaches for describing and assessing Speaking, so it was the skill modality undertaken first and to which the most effort was devoted. The Speaking descriptions have probably been used more often than any of the others. They also have been revised more frequently and more completely than the other descriptions.

Anecdotal reasons. Anecdotally, users of the ILR skill level descriptions in more than one skill modality have often remarked to the author that Speaking is more readily usable. To pursue such comments more systematically we devised a questionnaire and administered it to thirty major users of the ILR descriptions

(see figure 1 for the questionnaire and list 1 for the list of those surveyed).⁴ Of the thirty persons responding, one did not compare any set to Speaking, marking Reading easiest to use, and three ranked writing easiest to use; twenty-three ranked Speaking easiest to use. Furthermore, two tied Speaking and Reading in ease of use, and one tied Speaking and Listening. To summarize, a majority of respondents, 77%, ranked Speaking easiest to use.

There appears to be a strong relationship between frequency of use and ease of use for any given set of ILR descriptions. Several respondents remarked that their rankings were influenced by the frequency with which they used the various sets and that greater frequency led to greater familiarity and usually to greater ease of use. Five made no comment on frequency of use at all. For the most used category, one listed Listening as the skill most used, while another cited Reading. Seventeen of the thirty respondents to the questionnaire reported Speaking as the set most used. Another five tied Speaking with another skill: three tied Speaking and Listening; one tied Speaking and Reading, and another Speaking and Writing. Finally, two tied Listening and Reading. Coupling the number who found Speaking most frequently used outright with the number who tied Speaking as the most frequently used with another skill amounted to twenty-two out of thirty, or 73%, which approaches the percentage cited for easiest to use, which is 77%. But it should be noted that those who marked Speaking as “easiest to use” were not always those who identified the Speaking definitions as the “most frequently used.” Thus, for some respondents, Speaking’s ease of use did not always result from frequency of use. From the questionnaire’s answers we can see that it is possible to be more specific about the anecdotal reasons.⁵ It would, however, be helpful to adduce evidence beyond the anecdotal and historical as to why the Speaking definitions might be easier to use.

Empirical evidence. Answers of an empirical nature to the question of why the Speaking definitions are more useful than the others grew in part out of research begun and described in the author’s “Keeping the Optic Constant: A Framework of Principles for Writing & Specifying the AEI Definitions of Language Abilities” (Lowe 1998). That article presented the results of an empirical study of the statements in the Speaking definitions. To understand the results to be reported in this article on the comparison of the Speaking definitions to those of the other ILR skill modalities, certain features of that earlier article are recapitulated here. (For fuller details and a broader context, see the article itself.)

Some years ago, my colleagues and I noted that the definitions could be crafted from several different perspectives. Moreover, the perspectives could shift between and even within levels. Three perspectives emerged: a best case (BC), an average case (AC), and a worst case scenario (WC).⁶ Level 0 in Speaking, for example, contains a worst case scenario—*Unable to function in the spoken language* (WC)—while Level 5 contains a best case example—*The individual uses*

Figure 1. Survey on the ease of use of the ILR language skill level descriptions.

NAME: _____ Date: _____

Take this survey if you use any two of the ILR Skill Level Descriptions, say Speaking & Reading. If you use other descriptions than those for Speaking, tell us how easy they are to use comparatively speaking.

SECTION A: EXAMPLES Pardee Lowe, Jr.'s Rankings

SKILL	RANKING	COMMENTS ON FREQUENCY OF USE	POSSIBLE RESPONSES
Speaking		4 Used to use constantly	4 = Most Easy to Use
Listening		1.5 Use sporadically	
Reading		3 Use constantly	
Writing		1.5 Use rarely	
James R. Child's Rankings			
Speaking	NA		3
Listening		3 Essential for our work	2
Reading		4 Essential for our work	
Writing	UNDECIDED		1 = Least Easy to Use

SECTION B: YOUR RANKING:
 Now mark the four skill modalities according to your own experience: Using 4 for most easy to use down to 1 for least easy to use, NA for descriptions not used at all, or if undecided, write UNDECIDED next to the skill modality to which that applies. If you find two sets of descriptions equally useful you may give them the same rating.

You rank the skills as:

SKILL	RANKING	COMMENTS ON FREQUENCY OF USE
Speaking		
Listening		
Reading		
Writing		

Tied = -.5
 Undecided
 NA = Don't Use

While my results will remain anonymous, I will allow my name to be printed as having participated in this survey: YES NO (Circle One)

YOUR TITLE: _____ INSTITUTION: _____

List of those surveyed

Sabine Atwell	OPI Trainer at DLI
Abdelfattaq Boussalhi	OPI Trainer, Arabic OPI Tester at DLI
Maria Brau	OPI Trainer at the FBI
Christine Campbell	Test Project Director at DLI
James R. Child	Senior Language Research Analyst DOD
John L.D. Clark	Former Dean of Program Evaluation, Research & Testing at DLI
Ray T. Clifford	Provost, Defense Language Institute Foreign Language Center DLI
Pat Dage	Tester Trainer DLI
Katrin Gardiner	Former Chief of Testing LTD
Helen Hamlyn	Administrator of all ACTFL OPI Tests
Martha Herzog	Dean, Evaluation and Standards DLI
Dariusz Hooshmand	Former Director of Test & Standards Division at DLI
Monika Ihlenfeld	OPI Trainer & German OPI Tester at DLI
Frederick Jackson	Director of Research, Evaluation & Development FSI
Gordon Jackson	Tester Trainer & Researcher into Oral Proficiency Testing DLI
Steve Koppany	Coordinator of the DLI/NSA Diagnostic Project DLI
Pardee Lowe, Jr.	Chair, ILR Testing Committee, Former Chief of Testing LTD
Thomas Parry	Dean, Asian School 2, Former Chief of Testing LTD
Danielle Reulen	French OPI Tester ACTFL
Donald Smith	English and Russian OPI Trainer DLI
Andy Soh	DLPT Developer, Korean OPI Tester DLI
Stephen Soudakoff	English and Russian OPI Trainer DLI
Elvira Swender	Director of Professional Programs (includes OPI Testing & Training) ACTFL
John Thain	English OPI Tester DLI

Marijke Van Der Heide	OPI Trainer FBI
Phil White	English OPI Tester DLI
Protase Woodford	OPI Trainer for Peace Corps at ETS, Spanish OPI Tester ETS

Key:

ACTFL = American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages: Yonkers, NY

DLI = Defense Language Institute's Foreign Language Center: Monterey, CA

DOD = Department of Defense: Washington, DC

ETS = Educational Testing Service: Princeton, NJ

FBI = Federal Bureau of Investigation: Washington, DC

FSI = Foreign Service Institute of the Department of State: Arlington, VA

ILR = U.S. Government's Interagency Language Roundtable: Washington, DC

LTD = Language Training Division of the Central Intelligence Agency: Washington, DC

OPI = Oral Proficiency Interview

Note: Three respondents preferred anonymity. Their responses were most informative, however, and their data were included in the survey. Any person connected with ACTFL was queried only on the ease of use of the *ILR Language Skill Level Descriptions*.

the language with complete flexibility and intuition, so that speech on all levels is fully accepted by well-educated native speakers in all of its features, including the breadth of vocabulary and idiom, colloquialisms, and pertinent cultural references (BC).

Level 0 also illustrates how more than one perspective can be contained in the description at the same level: *unable to function in the spoken language* (WC); *oral production is limited to occasional isolated words* (AC); *has essentially no communicative ability* (AC).

What, then, do these perspectives contribute to the utility of the definitions? The answer is that the non-AC statements furnish boundaries. When a BC statement abuts on the next higher range or a WC statement touches the range just below it, a boundary is created. This renders the definitions more readily usable, because there is now a clear delimitation of why range X differs from range Y. In the previous

study it was shown in Speaking that boundaries are present at all but the level 3/3+ border (see table 1). We call this feature of the ILR skill level descriptions *boundedness*; that is, the extent to which one range is delimited from another.

Other skill modalities. In this study we looked at the distribution of BC, AC, and WC statements in each of the other ILR skill modalities—Writing, Listening, and Reading—and then compared the results to speaking in order to determine the extent of boundedness for each ILR skill modality. In order to

Table 1. ILR Speaking

ILR Level	Best Case	Average Case	Worst Case	Total Statements
5	1	2		3
4+		2	1	3
4	1	6	1	8
3+		1		1
3		7	1	8
2+		4	1	5
2		5	2	7
1+		7	1	8
1		6	1	7
0+		3	2	5
0		2	1	3
Average number of statements/level	0.18	4.09	1.00	5.27

Note: This tabulation of best case, average case, and worst case statements includes only the definition proper and excludes both the interactive Listening component and the examples section within the *ILR Skill Level Descriptions for Speaking*. Levels with no statements have been left blank.

accomplish this most directly, the examples sections in speaking were initially excluded from consideration (see table 1). After making the initial comparison between Speaking without examples to the other ILR skill modalities, I factored the Speaking examples section in. Those results are described at the end of this section.

Writing. As another production skill modality, one might expect Writing to parallel Speaking in the number of boundaries present. And, in fact, they were very close (see table 2). In Writing the evidence uncovers two missing boundaries: one between 4+/5 and one between 4/4+. It is our experience that these boundaries fall precisely at those levels where there is not much government writing.

Table 2. ILR writing

ILR Level	Best Case	Average Case	Worst Case	Total Statements
5	1	5		6
4+		3		3
4		6	1	7
3+		4	1	5
3	1	8	1	10
2+		8	2	10
2		7	2	9
1+		11	1	12
1		7	1	9
0+		4	1	5
0			1	1
Average number of statements/level	0.18	5.91	1.00	6.91

Note: Levels with no statements have been left blank.

Listening. One might expect some difference between the reception skills—Reading and Listening—and the production skills—Speaking and Writing. This was not, however, the case, at least for Listening, where one boundary was missing when compared to writing, and two boundaries when compared to speaking, for a total of three: 4+/5, 4/4+, and 3+/4 (see table 3). Note again that these boundaries also mainly fall above where most government listening is done. It has been the experience of my colleagues and me that the Listening skill level descriptions are not as easy to use as the Speaking. Besides being less bounded, Listening skill descriptions lack description of text types, and, to date, no attempt has been made to deal with text types in the Listening skill level descriptions. Indicating the type of text is also a problem with the Reading skill level descriptions, but for Reading a text typology has been proposed (see next section).

Table 3. ILR listening

ILR Level	Best Case	Average Case	Worst Case	Total Statements
5	1	2		3
4+		4		4
4		7		7
3+		7	1	8
3	1	7	1	9
2+	2	5		7
2	1	7		8
1+		9	2	11
1		6	4	10
0+		6	2	8
0		2	1	3
Average Number of Statements/Level	0.45	5.64	1.00	7.09

Note: Levels with no statements have been left blank.

Reading. This skill modality proved to be very different from the others. In Reading, six boundaries were missing: 4+/5, 4/4+, 3+/4, 3/3+, 2+/3, 2/2+ (see table 4). Note that these missing boundaries occurred at the middle and upper ranges. If one hazards a guess as to why they remain unspecified, one might point out that the *ILR Skill Level Descriptions for Reading* are concerned more with describing abilities and less with the specification of text difficulty at these levels, although this is also true for Listening, where the gaps are fewer. Many of the missing gaps for Reading are provided by James R. Child's work on text typology (1987). The fact that so many boundaries are missing in Reading may, however, help to explain why the Reading definitions prove harder to apply.

Table 4. ILR reading

ILR Level	Best Case	Average Case	Worst Case	Total Statements
5	1	6		7
4+		5		5
4		10		10
3+		6		6
3		7		7
2+		7		7
2		10		10
1+		7	1	8
1		6	2	8
0+		4	1	5
0				0
Average Number of Statements/Level	0.09	6.18	0.36	6.64

Note: Levels with no statements have been left blank.

Comparing skill modalities. Table 5 summarizes for each ILR skill modality the number of boundaries missing, the levels at which they are missing, and the number of statements per level. Eighteen out of the twenty-five respondents to our questionnaire remarked that Speaking proved to be the most usable of the ILR skill level descriptions. One could hypothesize that this might be the case because of the number of statements per level. But of the average number of statements per level (excluding the examples sections in Speaking, which may influence the outcome), Speaking has the lowest average with 5.27, Reading is next with 6.64, Writing with 6.91, and Listening with 7.09 statements per level each (see Table 5). I will return to this aspect later. What may contribute to the greater utility of Speaking is the number of boundaries: Speaking has only one boundary missing, while Writing has two, Listening three, and Reading six. Having used the Reading definitions for passage rating, item design, and rating of Reading ability, we can personally attest that they are harder to apply than Speaking. It may also be the case that the reception skill modalities are harder to characterize than production skill modalities due in part to the need for describing text types as well, which the current descriptions do not do. The comparisons in table 5 were possible because we excluded the example sections contained only in Speaking.

Table 6 shows what the examples add to each level in Speaking (levels 0 and 5 lack example sections). In all likelihood this further exemplification also helps to render the Speaking definitions more usable compared to those for the other ILR skill modalities. The example sections contain 69 statements in total, which when divided by the 11 possible levels add an average of 6.27 statements per level, a significant increase. When the number of statements for the examples section are added to the Speaking section, the average comes to 11.72, by far the greatest average for any of the skill modalities (see table 5). While this makes the Speaking definitions more usable overall, *it does not solve the boundary problem at 3/3+ border*, as the added statements are either AC or WC, but not the required WC for 3+ or the required BC for 3! It should be noted that the majority of additions in the examples sections for Speaking are AC, not BC or WC statements. Moreover, the non-AC statements tend to be WC, not BC (see table 6).

Conclusion. The goal of this article was to ascertain possible reasons as to why the *U.S. Government’s ILR Language Skill Level Description for Speaking*

Table 5. Average number of statements per level

Listening	Writing	Reading	Speaking with no examples	Speaking examples only	Speaking with examples
7.09	6.91	6.64	5.27	6.27	11.55

Table 6. ILR speaking examples only

ILR Level	Best Case	Average Case	Worst Case	Total Statements
5				0
4+		6		6
4		7		7
3+	1	5		6
3	2	5		7
2+	1	6		7
2		6		6
1+	1	9		10
1	1	7	7	15
0+		4	1	5
0				0
Average Number of Statements/Level	0.55	5.00	0.73	6.27

Note. Levels with no statements have been left blank.

might prove more readily usable than the ILR descriptions for the other skill modalities. To that end I compared the boundedness of each of the skill modalities to Speaking. The results reveal that Speaking is most bounded (one boundary missing even when one includes the examples section in the Speaking definitions); Writing is less bounded (with two boundaries missing); Listening still less (three boundaries missing); and finally, Reading is the least bounded (with six boundaries missing). One possible reason for the difficulty some have found in applying the Reading definitions may lie in the fact that so many boundaries are missing at the mid and upper ranges.

Conversely, the greater utility of the speaking descriptions may lie in their almost maximal boundedness.⁷ Another possible reason may lie in the examples

sections, which increase the number of best case, average case, and worst case statements available at each level. In addition to historical and anecdotal evidence, it is therefore possible to adduce empirical bases for the varying levels of utility of each of the ILR skill level descriptions, particularly for the greater ease of use for Speaking. As one of the users of the descriptions in all four ILR skill modalities, we can say that our experience in actually applying the descriptions generally matches the data produced for the greater utility of Speaking. Of course, research similar to that carried out for the ILR descriptions remains to be undertaken for the ACTFL guidelines. The author proposes to do this in a follow-on investigation.

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APPENDIX A. WRITING: BEST CASE (BC)/WORST CASE (WC)

- Level 0 (No Proficiency): *No functional writing ability (WC).*
- Level 0+ (Memorized Proficiency): *Ability to write is limited to simple lists of common items such as a few short sentences (WC).*
- Level 1 (Elementary Proficiency): *Making continual errors in spelling, grammar, and punctuation (WC).*
- Level 1+ (Elementary Proficiency, Plus): *Can produce some past verb forms but not always accurately or with correct usage (WC).*
- Level 2 (Limited Working Proficiency): *Can write simply about a very limited number of current events or daily situations (WC). Still makes common errors in spelling and punctuation (WC).*
- Level 2+ (Limited Working Proficiency, Plus): *Shows a limited ability to use circumlocutions (WC), though style is still obviously foreign (WC).*
- Level 3 (General Professional Proficiency): *Employs a full range of structures (BC), but style may be obviously foreign (WC).*
- Level 3+ (General Professional Proficiency, Plus): *Organization may suffer due to lack of variety in organizational patterns or in variety of cohesive devices (WC).*
- Level 4 (Advanced Professional Proficiency): *Writing adequate to express all his/her experiences (WC).*
- Level 4+ (Advanced Professional Proficiency, Plus): *none.*
- Level 5 (Functionally Native Proficiency): *Has writing proficiency equal to that of a well-educated native (BC).*

APPENDIX B. LISTENING: BEST CASE (BC)/WORST CASE (WC)

- Level 0: *Essentially no ability to comprehend communication (WC).*
- Level 0+: *Sufficient comprehension to understand a number of memorized utterances in areas of immediate needs (WC).*
Slight increase in utterance length understood but requires frequent long pauses between understood phrases and repeated requests on the listener's part for repetition (WC).
Understands with reasonable accuracy only when this involves short memorized utterances or formulae (WC).
Can understand only with difficulty even such people as teachers who are used to speaking with non-native speakers (WC).
- Level 1: *These (simple questions, answers, and simple statements) must often be delivered more clearly than normal at a rate slower than normal with frequent repetitions or paraphrase (that is, by a native used to dealing with foreigners).*

In the majority of utterances, misunderstandings arise due to overlooked or misunderstood syntax and other grammatical clues (WC).

Comprehension vocabulary inadequate to understand anything but the most elementary needs (WC).

Strong interference from the candidate's native language occurs (WC).

Level 1+: *Cannot sustain understanding of coherent structures in longer utterances or in unfamiliar situations (WC).*

Understanding of descriptions and the giving of precise information limited (WC).

Level 2: *Can follow essential points of discussion or speech at an elementary level on topics in his/her special professional field (BC).*

Level 2+: *Can sometimes detect emotional overtones (BC).*

Some ability to understand implications (BC).

Level 3: *Does not understand native speakers if they speak very quickly or use some slang or dialect (WC).*

Can understand without difficulty all forms of standard speech concerning a special professional field (BC).

Level 3+: *Increased ability to understand native speakers talking quickly, using nonstandard dialect or slang, however comprehension not complete (WC).*

Level 4: none.

Level 4+: none.

Level 5: *Able to understand fully all forms and styles of speech intelligible to the well-educated native listener, including a number of regional and illiterate dialects, highly colloquial speech and conversations and discourse distorted by marked interference from other noise (BC).*

APPENDIX C: READING: BEST CASE (BC)/WORST CASE (WC)

Level 0: *Consistently misunderstands or cannot comprehend at all (WC).*

Level 0+: none.

Level 1: *In commonly taught languages, an R-1 may not control the structure well (WC).*

Level 1+: *Characteristically, however, the R-2 is quite slow in performing such a process (WC).*

Level 2: none.

Level 2+: none.

Level 3: none.

Level 3+: none.

Level 4: none.

Level 4+: none.

Level 5: *Can read extremely difficult and abstract prose (BC).*

APPENDIX D: SPEAKING WITHOUT EXAMPLES: BEST CASE (BC)/WORST CASE (WC)

- Level 0 (No Proficiency): *Unable to function in the spoken language (WC).*
- Level 0+ (Memorized Proficiency): *Shows little real autonomy of expression, flexibility, or spontaneity (WC).*
Attempts at creating speech are usually unsuccessful (WC).
- Level 1 (Elementary Proficiency) *The individual is unable to produce continuous discourse except with rehearsed material (WC).*
- Level 1+ (Elementary Proficiency, Plus): *Range and control of the language are limited (WC).*
- Level 2 (Limited Working Proficiency) *Errors are frequent (WC).*
- Level 2+ (Limited Working Proficiency, Plus): *When under tension or pressure, the ability to use the language effectively may deteriorate (WC).*
- Level 3 (General Professional Proficiency): *Pronunciation may be obviously foreign (WC).*
- Level 3+ (General Professional Proficiency, Plus): *no BC or WC statement.*
- Level 4 (Advanced Professional Proficiency): *The individual's language usage and ability to function are fully successful (BC).*
The individual would seldom be perceived as a native (WC).
- Level 4+ (Advanced Professional Proficiency, Plus): *The individual would not necessarily be perceived as culturally native (WC).*
- Level 5 (Functionally Native Proficiency): *The individual uses the language with complete flexibility and intuition, so that speech on all levels is fully accepted by well-educated native speakers in all of its features, including breadth of vocabulary and idiom, colloquialisms, and pertinent cultural references (BC).*

APPENDIX E: SPEAKING EXAMPLES: BEST CASE (BC)/WORST CASE (WC)

- Level 0: none.
- Level 0+: *Even with repetition, communication is severely limited even with people used to dealing with foreigners (WC).*
- Level 1: *Structural accuracy is likely to be random or severely limited (WC).*
Vocabulary is inaccurate (WC).
The individual often speaks with great difficulty (WC).
By repeating, such speakers can make themselves understood to native speakers who are in regular contact with foreigners (WC).
Almost every utterance may be characterized by structure errors and errors in basic grammatical relations (WC).
Vocabulary is extremely limited (WC).

Use of structure and vocabulary is highly imprecise (WC).

He/she might give information about business hours, explain routine procedures in a limited way, and state in a simple manner what actions will be taken (BC).

Level 1+: *Speaking ability may extend beyond immediate survival needs (BC).*

Accuracy in basic grammatical relations is evident, although not consistent (WC).

But may make frequent errors in formation and selection [of more common verb tenses] (WC).

Ability to describe and give precise information is limited (WC).

Pronunciation is understandable to natives used to dealing with foreigners (WC).

Has difficulty in producing certain sounds in certain positions or in certain combinations (WC).

Speech will usually be labored (WC).

Frequently has to repeat utterances to be understood by general public (WC).

Level 2: none.

Level 2+: *Discourse is often incohesive (WC).*

Level 3: *Can reliably elicit information and informed opinion from native speakers (BC).*

Use of structural devices is flexible and elaborate (BC).

Level 3+: *Discourse competence in a wide range of contexts and tasks, often matching a native's strategic and organizational abilities and expectations (BC).*

Level 4: none.

Level 4+: none.

Level 5: none.

NOTES

1. The thoughts expressed herein are those of the author and in no way reflect those of the Department of Defense. I wish to thank James R. Child and Beth Mackey for critiquing an earlier version of this article. Naturally, any errors are the responsibility of the author.
2. At times the terms “description(s)” and “definition(s)” are employed as a short hand for the longer ILR Language Skill Level Descriptions.
3. One way to show the relatedness of the ILR Language Skill Level Descriptions and the ACTFL/ETS Guidelines is to encompass them by the acronym AEI. In the acronym AEI, the A refers to ACTFL (American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages), the E to the ETS (Educational Testing Service), and the I to the ILR (The U.S. Government’s Interagency Language Roundtable), respectively. These organizations (in an order reverse to that of the acronym) have contributed historically to the development and elaboration of definitions of foreign language proficiency—defined in this context as “the functional use of language,” be it Speaking, Listening, Reading, or Writing. The reason to use the cover term AEI comes from the fact that the ACTFL Guidelines are derived from the ILR Skill Level Descriptions and the resulting ACTFL/ETS scale is basically commensurate with the ILR’s. For a discussion of the differences between the two scales, see Lowe and Stansfield (1988). While the AEI scales have been used for several purposes, the focus in what follows is on testing.
4. Originally designed as a single page paper-and-pencil questionnaire, the author was forced on one occasion early on to administer it by phone and found that the procedure permitted him to answer any questions not covered in the relatively short instructions and examples of the paper-and-pencil version. Therefore, with three exceptions, he standardized on the phone approach.
5. The author is loath to draw further conclusions from the survey. The reason lies in the almost universal comment on the part of those surveyed that for them strong differences in frequency of use existed among the ILR skill modality descriptions. Very few responded with equal or almost equal use of any two, let alone three or four skill modality descriptions. By and large, the majority of answers made it clear that respondents found ILR Speaking descriptions more usable, but, in general, it was harder to describe their responses in the aggregate in relation to the other skill modalities.
6. The heuristic used to determine best case and worst case statements was, “Is this the best or worst that could be said of a language user and still rate her or him in this range?” The BC and WC statements for each of the four skill modalities may be found in the appendixes to this article. Statements not cited there are assumed to be AC and were excluded to save space.
7. In an earlier article (Lowe 1998), I suggested approaches to finding those features that would aid in delimiting the missing boundaries. While the distinction made there between “constructs” and “findings” still holds for this current research, it may be necessary to delimit the borders sooner than the availability of suitable “findings.” As a result of this more expedient approach, revisers may have to employ “constructs” as an intermediate step and test their applicability by using them in an interim revised set of descriptions (see Lowe 1998: 366f.)