

## ALTA Language Services Oral Language Proficiency Testing

ALTA performs thousands of language tests each year using its Spoken Language Evaluation™ (SLE) process. The SLE process consists of several important elements that ensure that the result reflects the candidate's capability to speak and understand the language. All of ALTA's oral language testing is done by telephone. This is the common practice for oral language testing. The overall testing process contains several elements, which are described below:

**Test Administration** – At the scheduled time, the testing candidate calls the telephone number given during scheduling. Each oral test takes an average of fifteen to twenty minutes and is recorded. The evaluator will ask the candidate various questions in order to get a sample of the candidate's ability to speak and comprehend the language. The questions are designed to elicit the full range of the target language, and require the candidate to perform various linguistic tasks (e.g., giving and supporting an opinion, providing a description, explaining something that occurs daily or that occurred in the past). The evaluator is listening for *what* the candidate can do with the language, as well as *how well* the candidate uses and controls the language (i.e., handling structures of the language, etc.).

When a test is scheduled, ALTA's testing database automatically selects one question for that language from each of twelve pools. This is a random selection made by the database. Each pool of questions focuses on a specific language requirement or linguistic task and contains a sufficiently large number of questions so that the candidate could be asked a question on a wide variety of subjects. This greatly reduces the possibility that the candidate can anticipate the questions and prepare answers in advance, and minimizes the possibility of duplicate tests. The questions are either personal or general in nature, and the complexity of questions builds as the test progresses, causing the candidate to use the full range of his/her language ability.

The candidate simply answers each question that is presented. If requested, the evaluator will repeat the question or rephrase the question. The evaluator will also encourage the candidate to give long enough answers so that a representative sample of the candidate's speech is given by asking follow-up questions such as "Why?" or "Explain." However, the evaluator otherwise has no control over the questions/requests for responses being asked, and in fact, does not know the questions in advance of the test.

**Test Scoring** – Following the test, the evaluator determines the skill level of the candidate in each subcategory according to ALTA's Oral Language Testing Protocol. The evaluator then assigns an overall score on ALTA's 1-12 scale based on the total test performance. The score is entered into ALTA's testing database. The ALTA evaluation process assesses the level of skill in two areas – speaking and listening – which are further subdivided into the scoring subcategories as shown below:

**Communication** – Communication consists of four elements:

ACCENT: What degree of non-native accent and pronunciation does the candidate have?

SCOPE: How easily can the candidate express ideas?

SPEED: How rapidly can the candidate speak and how much does the candidate hesitate?

STRUCTURE: How well does the candidate use the complexity of the language?

**Comprehension** – Comprehension consists of three elements:

SCOPE: How wide is the candidate's range of comprehension?

SPEED: What speed of talking by a native speaker can the candidate understand?

STRUCTURE: What complexity of speech can the candidate understand?

**Grammar** – Grammar consists of three elements:

NOUNS: How well does the candidate use proper gender and cases (where applicable)?

STRUCTURE: How well does the candidate use complex structures?

VERBS: How well does the candidate use correct conjugations, subject-verb agreement, mood and voice?

**Vocabulary** – Vocabulary consists of one element:

SCOPE: How wide is the candidate's range of vocabulary and how precise?

All oral evaluations are scored across these subcategories according to ALTA's scoring protocol, which encompasses each of these elements. An overall score is provided which is a holistic measurement of performance with respect to performance in all of the scoring subcategories. There are no worldwide standards on defining performance in speaking, understanding, and writing in a language. What ALTA has done is to select the two standards that are applied to many different languages and combine them into one standard. The U.S. Government's Interagency Language Roundtable (ILR) and The American Council for Teaching Foreign Languages (ACTFL) standards are both designed to apply to all languages. ALTA has combined these two standards into a twelve level scale of performance in the skill levels shown below:

<b>Level</b>	<b>General Description</b>
<b>1</b>	A level 1 speaker has no ability whatsoever in the language. He/She cannot understand anything and can convey nothing.
<b>2</b>	A level 2 speaker can understand isolated words and simple expressions. He/She can convey isolated words or simple expressions and memorized sentences.
<b>3</b>	A level 3 person can understand and express simple sentences using subjects and verbs in the present tense. The range of vocabulary is limited to elementary needs and basic courtesies
<b>4</b>	The level 4 person can understand basic sentences around the immediate setting as well as basic questions. He/She can express simple ideas using the present tense and may occasionally use other simple tenses. He/She can convey basic information, but has difficulty even in basic conversations.
<b>5</b>	A person at a level 5 has the ability to participate in basic conversations. The subjects are routine in nature and tend to be repetitive, for example weather. A level 5 speaker uses primarily the present tense and cannot use advanced tenses, thus is very restricted on expressing and understanding any subject other than what is most familiar to him/her. Speech is slow, and he/she requires more rephrasing and repetition to understand a native speaker.
<b>6</b>	A level 6 person can use and understand the present, past and future tenses with some errors. He/She does not use advanced tenses. He/She can easily participate in a conversation on basic subjects like weather, but not in a general conversation. He/She usually cannot understand normal native rates of speech.
<b>7</b>	A person at a level 7 cannot easily participate in general conversations. He/She can participate in conversations that are routine or on topics that are

	<p>well known to the person. He/She will have trouble with a native speaker's normal pace. He/She will use simple tenses with a few errors, but will avoid advanced tenses. A candidate at this level in a general conversation will cause misunderstandings between himself/herself and the listener based on lack of ability to convey clearly his/her message.</p>
9	<p>A person at a level 9 can successfully handle in-depth conversations in the target language, on a broad range of subjects and at a normal rate of speech. He/She has difficulty understanding some slang or idioms or some advanced grammatical structures, but can figure out what is said by the context of the discussion. When speaking, a person at a level 9 can express himself/herself over a broad range of topics at a normal speed. He/She may have a noticeable accent and will make grammatical errors, for example with advanced tenses, but the errors will not cause misunderstanding to a native speaker.</p>
10	<p>A person at a level 10 can handle all of the tasks that a level 9 can, with the addition of demonstrating skills such as selling and persuasion. He/She can successfully handle in-depth client questions, and does not require as much contextual support for understanding of slang and idioms. A person at this level is able to select vocabulary that conveys a finer shade of meaning with more precision than a level 9 and can better support his/her opinions. Errors in speech are few, are limited to advanced grammatical situations and do not affect understanding.</p>
11	<p>A person at a level 11 is nearly fluent. He/She can handle a wide variety of communicative tasks with finesse. His/her communication is close to that of a well educated speaker, and only encounters difficulty if speech is highly abstract. Errors in speech are very few, are limited to advanced grammatical situations and do not affect understanding.</p>
12	<p>The level 12 oral skills are equivalent to native fluency. The person can understand everything said in the language and can speak with precision and finesse using the full range of grammar, vocabulary, idioms and expression.</p>