



Massachusetts Department of
ELEMENTARY & SECONDARY
EDUCATION

Overview of the Massachusetts English Language Assessment-Oral (MELA-O)

Massachusetts Department of
Elementary and Secondary Education
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This document was prepared by the
Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education

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Commissioner of Elementary and Secondary Education

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Commissioner's Foreword

Dear Colleagues:

I am pleased to provide you with the *Overview of the Massachusetts English Language Assessment-Oral (MELA-O)*. The purpose of this publication is to provide a description of the MELA-O for educators, parents, and others who have an interest in the assessment of students who are designated as limited English proficient (LEP).

The MELA-O is one component of the Massachusetts English Proficiency Assessment (MEPA), the state's English proficiency assessment. The MEPA consists of the MEPA reading and writing test (MEPA-R/W) which assesses the reading and writing proficiency of students who are English language learners (ELL); and the MELA-O which assesses speaking and listening proficiency. Both assessments are required for all students in grades Kindergarten through grade 12 who have been reported as LEP by their district. The MEPA is used to inform schools and parents about the progress of each student in learning English and to meet state and federal requirements to assess LEP students.

MELA-O is administered by qualified individuals who have been trained in the use of the MELA-O Scoring Matrix and who have passed a qualifying test. The training and qualification procedures for educators who administer the MELA-O ensure that high levels of accuracy and precision are maintained in assessing the oral language skills of LEP students. The Department has conducted training sessions to ensure that there is at least one qualified MELA-O trainer (QMT) in each district who is responsible for training a sufficient number of staff to annually administer the MELA-O to LEP students in each district.

This publication outlines the policies and procedures governing the MELA-O and provides information on oral language acquisition for ELL students. I hope you will find this information helpful.

Thank you for your interest in the MELA-O.

Sincerely,

Mitchell D. Chester, Ed.D.
Commissioner of Elementary and Secondary Education

TABLE OF CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION.....	2
BACKGROUND.....	2
WHO ADMINISTERS THE MELA-O?	3
TRAINING AND QUALIFICATION PROCEDURES FOR EACH QMT AND QMA	3
ONLINE LIST OF QMTS AND QMAS	3
MATERIALS USED TO TRAIN AND QUALIFY QMTS AND QMAS	3
BENEFITS TO EDUCATORS FROM ADMINISTERING THE MELA-O.....	4
MELA-O ADMINISTRATION AND SCORING.....	4
OVERVIEW OF THE MELA-O SCORING MATRIX	5
MELA-O FORMS.....	13

Introduction

This publication describes the process of the oral assessment of limited English proficient (LEP) students in the Commonwealth of Massachusetts. It provides information about the academic foundation of the assessment, the administration procedures, the training and qualification of the test administrators, and the scoring procedures. This document is intended to provide information to educators, parents, and others who have an interest in the assessment of English language learners in Massachusetts.

Background

The Massachusetts English Language Assessment-Oral (MELA-O) is an assessment tool designed to evaluate the English language comprehension (listening) and production (speaking) skills of LEP students also known as English language learners (ELLs), in grades K–12. The MELA-O is a required part of the statewide English proficiency assessment for LEP students, called the Massachusetts English Proficiency Assessment (MEPA). The MEPA program was developed in order to comply with state and federal assessment requirements, as well as to:

- identify whether a student has achieved proficiency in English
- measure the progress a student is making toward English proficiency
- provide data and resources to strengthen curriculum, instruction, and classroom assessment

The MELA-O is one of two assessments that make up the MEPA:

1. The Massachusetts English Proficiency Assessment-Reading and Writing (MEPA-R/W) is a paper-and-pencil or online test that measures proficiency in reading and writing.
2. The Massachusetts English Language Assessment-Oral (MELA-O) measures proficiency in speaking (production) and listening (comprehension) based on the observation of individual students by a qualified MELA-O administrator (QMA) or trainer (QMT) using the MELA-O Scoring Matrix.

Student scores on both the MEPA-R/W and MELA-O are used to determine a student's overall MEPA score. A student's MEPA score corresponds with five MEPA performance levels 1–5, with Level 5 being the highest level of proficiency. It is recommended that students who score Level 5 be reclassified as non-LEP (or formerly LEP), unless there are additional reasons to maintain a student's classification as LEP. Additional guidance on making reclassification decisions is available online at <http://www.doe.mass.edu/mcas/mepa/2009/guidance.pdf>.

The MELA-O is aligned with the listening and speaking skills identified in the Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education's *English Language Proficiency Benchmarks and Outcomes for English Language Learners (ELPBO)*, available at www.doe.mass.edu/ell/benchmark.pdf.

Who Administers the MELA-O?

The MELA-O is administered by qualified professional educators—QMAs and QMTs—who have been trained to score this assessment using the MELA-O Scoring Matrix. The MELA-O Scoring Matrix is used to accomplish the following:

- to train and qualify professional educators to administer (and train others to administer) the MELA-O by comparing their scores with agreed-upon scores in each area of the MELA-O Scoring Matrix on pre-calibrated video samples of LEP students.
- to rate the English-language listening and speaking skills of LEP students in their school districts.

The Department conducts training workshops each spring and fall for QMTs to ensure that at least one QMT per district will be responsible for training a sufficient number of QMAs to annually assess every LEP student in each district.

Only QMTs and QMAs may assess LEP students on the MELA-O. A QMT or QMA may be the classroom teacher of the LEP student being assessed, though this is not a requirement.

Training and Qualification Procedures for each QMT and QMA

QMTs are trained at a two-day session sponsored by the Department of Elementary and Secondary Education. Once QMTs have been trained and qualified, they are provided with materials (including a training manual, training DVDs, and a qualifying test DVD) to be used to train QMAs in their districts. Prospective QMAs participate in a 1½-day training session with a QMT and then take a qualifying test. There are multiple opportunities for each QMA to qualify in the event that he or she is unable to qualify on the first attempt.

Online List of QMTs and QMAs

The Department maintains an online database listing all QMTs and QMAs in each district at http://www.doe.mass.edu/mcas/mepa/testadmin/melao_lep.html, and updates this list twice each year.

Materials Used to Train and Qualify QMTs and QMAs

In 2007, the Department produced a narrated training video and a qualifying test that were used to train and qualify new QMTs and QMAs as well as to retrain and requalify QMTs and QMAs who had qualified prior to 2007 and wished to continue to report MELA-O scores for MEPA after January 2010. The training and qualification video portrays students of various ages and linguistic backgrounds interacting with teachers and other students during academic activities based on the state's curriculum frameworks.

The development of new training and qualification materials and procedures was intended to ensure that these processes were standardized for educators who conduct the MELA-O and to ensure that QMTs and QMAs maintained a uniformly high level of accuracy and precision in assessing the oral language skills of LEP students. Between 2007 and 2010, more than 650 QMTs and 8,000 QMAs were trained (or retrained) and qualified using the new materials and procedures.

Benefits to Educators from Administering the MELA-O

In addition to meeting state and federal requirements for assessing LEP students on their English language proficiency, administering the MELA-O appears to provide educational benefits to educators as well, including the ability of teachers and administrators to:

- evaluate the language needs of English language learners on a daily basis and determine whether these students understand what they have been taught
- focus on classroom instruction that promotes student learning for ELL students
- develop academic curricula that engage LEP students meaningfully at all levels of English language proficiency
- evaluate their own performance as teachers of LEP students

MELA-O Administration and Scoring

MELA-O is conducted each spring by a QMT or QMA who observes an LEP student during the performance of academic activities and during participation in routine social interactions with other students and the teacher during classroom instruction. Students who were not assessed the previous spring must be assessed in the fall in order to obtain a baseline for reporting progress the following spring. The MELA-O is conducted during a prescribed administration period of about one month.

The following general rules are observed in the rating of individual students on the MELA-O:

- Only QMTs and QMAs are authorized to administer the MELA-O and to rate LEP students using the MELA-O Scoring Matrix as part of the statewide MEPA administration.
- QMAs and QMTs must be educational professionals, although exceptions may be made for paraprofessionals and other non-professional staff at the school's discretion.
- A QMT or QMA may be the classroom teacher of the LEP student being assessed, though this is not a requirement.
- Students must be observed primarily in classroom settings while engaging in interactive academic activities with the classroom teacher and/or other students.
- Observations must be of sufficient duration which may include multiple observations to ensure a valid and reliable sample of the student's language proficiency. An appropriate amount of time must be allotted in order to attain an adequate language sample.
- Raters may consult with another QMA who has also observed the student, if necessary.
- The MELA-O Scoring Matrix must be used as the basis for assessing the comprehension (listening) and production (speaking) skills of LEP students for reporting oral language proficiency to the state.

Overview of the MELA-O Scoring Matrix

The MELA-O Scoring Matrix (shown on page 6) is based on the American Council for the Teaching of Foreign Languages (ACTFL) Guidelines and is modeled on the Student Oral Language Observation Matrix (SOLOM) developed by the San Jose (CA) Unified School District (1985) and the Student Oral Proficiency Rating (SOPR) designed by Development Associates (1987).

The scoring dimensions of the MELA-O Scoring Matrix are briefly described on the following page. An expanded version of the matrix (on pages 7–11) provides a detailed description of each of the five dimensions of the MELA-O Scoring Matrix listed below, and each 0–5 rating.

- **Comprehension** - The process by which a person understands the meaning of spoken or written language.
- **Production** - The process of communicating through speech. The MELA-O Scoring Matrix focuses on four specific areas of speech production:
 - **Fluency** - The ability to produce continuous speech without pause or hesitation in the “flow” of spoken communication.
 - **Vocabulary** - Units of language used to convey meaning in the language system.
 - **Pronunciation** - The way certain sounds in a language are produced. Pronunciation includes intonation, rhythm, emphasis, and juncture (pauses).
 - **Grammar** - The structural arrangement and relationship of words to one another. For the purpose of scoring MELA-O, grammar also includes syntax (sentence structure) and word order.

The MELA-O Scoring Matrix

		LEVEL 0	LEVEL 1	LEVEL 2	LEVEL 3	LEVEL 4	LEVEL 5
PRODUCTION	COMPREHENSION	No demonstrated proficiency	Recognizes simple questions and commands; responds to more complex utterances with inappropriate or inaudible responses	Understands interpersonal conversation when spoken to slowly and with frequent repetitions; acknowledgment may be either non-verbal, or in the native language or target language	Understands and is capable of responding to most interpersonal and classroom discussions and interaction when frequent clarifications or repetitions are given	Understands nearly all interpersonal and classroom discussions, although occasional clarifications or repetitions may be necessary	Understands interpersonal conversations and classroom discussions
	FLUENCY	No demonstrated proficiency	Speech is limited to an exchange of fixed verbal formulae (e.g. commonly used sentences and phrases) or single word utterances	Uses familiar sentences with reasonable ease; long pauses or silence are common and gestures are often used to illustrate meaning	Begins to create more novel sentences; speech in interpersonal and classroom discussions is frequently interrupted by a search for the correct manner or expression	Speech in interpersonal and classroom discussions is generally fluent, with occasional lapses while the student searches for the correct manner of expression	Speech in interpersonal conversation and in classroom discussions is approximately that of a native speaker of the same age
	VOCABULARY	No demonstrated proficiency	Has limited command of isolated vocabulary for common objects and activities but comprehensibility is often difficult	Has command of words for common objects/activities but choice of words is often inappropriate for the situation/context; comprehensibility remains difficult	Has adequate vocabulary to permit somewhat limited discussion of interpersonal and classroom topics; usually comprehensible	Flow of speech is rarely interrupted by inadequate vocabulary; is capable of rephrasing ideas and thoughts to express meaning	Use of vocabulary and idioms approximates that of a native speaker of the same age
	PRONUNCIATION	No demonstrated proficiency	Seldom intelligible and is strongly influenced by the primary language, including intonation and word stress; must repeat to be understood	Sometimes intelligible; is frequently influenced by the primary language and must repeat utterances to be understood	Usually speaks intelligibly, with some sounds still influenced by the primary language; frequently uses non-native intonation patterns	Always intelligible with occasional inappropriate intonation patterns; slight influence of the primary language may still be noticeable	Pronunciation and intonation approximate those of a native speaker of the same age
	GRAMMAR	No demonstrated proficiency	Produces only memorized grammar and word order forms	Often uses basic grammar patterns correctly in simple, familiar phrases and sentences; rarely or seldom attempts complex sentences	Uses basic grammar correctly; attempts complex sentences, but complex language structures are often incorrect	May make limited, minor grammatical errors, but they do not obscure meaning	Grammatical usage approximates that of a native speaker of the same age

The MELA-O is aligned with the listening and speaking skills identified in the Massachusetts **English Language Proficiency Benchmarks and Outcomes for English Language Learners (ELPBO)**. The MELA-O was developed by the Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education in collaboration with the Evaluation Assistance Center-East (EAC) at George Washington University.

Comprehension (Expanded Version)

	LEVEL 0	LEVEL 1	LEVEL 2	LEVEL 3	LEVEL 4	LEVEL 5
COMPREHENSION	No <u>demonstrated</u> proficiency	Recognizes <u>simple questions and commands</u> ; responds to more complex utterances with <u>inappropriate or inaudible responses</u>	Understands <u>interpersonal conversation</u> when spoken to <u>slowly</u> and <u>with frequent repetitions</u> ; acknowledgment may be either non-verbal, or in the native language or target language	Understands and is capable of responding to <u>most interpersonal and classroom discussions</u> and interaction when <u>frequent clarifications</u> or repetitions are given	Understands <u>nearly all interpersonal and classroom discussions</u> , although occasional clarifications or repetitions may be necessary	Understands <u>interpersonal conversations and classroom discussions</u>

The goal in assessing a learner’s **comprehension** of oral language is to determine his or her level of **understanding** by observing oral and behavioral responses in the classroom setting. For English language learners, proficiency in comprehension often precedes proficiency in production. Thus, a student’s comprehension rating will generally be equal to or higher than his/her production ratings.

LEVEL 0: At this level, a student has no demonstrated proficiency. Although the student may, in fact, comprehend, she/he exhibits **no observable behavior** to indicate this comprehension.

LEVEL 1: At this level, the student recognizes **simple questions and commands** and responds to more complex utterances with inappropriate or inaudible responses. This level describes students who indicate **comprehension of simple speech** through physical or oral behavior.

LEVEL 2: A student at this level understands interpersonal conversation when spoken to slowly and with **frequent repetitions or clarification**; acknowledgment may be non-verbal, or in the native language or target language. At this level the student shows that he/she comprehends enough to **participate in two-way interpersonal conversations**.

LEVEL 3: A student at this level understands and is capable of responding to **most** interpersonal and classroom discussions and interactions when frequent clarifications or repetitions are given. The primary difference between levels 2 and level 3 is the student’s progression from participating in strictly interpersonal conversation to **classroom discussions** as well.

LEVEL 4: A student at this level understands **nearly all** interpersonal and classroom discussions, although **occasional repetition** or clarification may be necessary. The primary difference between levels 3 and 4 is the progression from understanding “most” to “nearly all” discussions, and the progression from “frequent” to “occasional” need for repetition or clarification.

LEVEL 5: At this level, a student understands both interpersonal and classroom discussions. His/her comprehension is **equivalent to that of a native speaker of the same age**.

Fluency (Expanded Version)

		LEVEL 0	LEVEL 1	LEVEL 2	LEVEL 3	LEVEL 4	LEVEL 5
PRODUCTION	FLUENCY	No <u>demonstrated</u> proficiency	Speech is limited to an exchange of <u>fixed verbal formulae</u> (e.g. commonly used sentences and phrases) or <u>single word utterances</u>	Uses <u>familiar sentences</u> with reasonable ease; <u>long pauses or silence are common</u> and <u>gestures are often used</u> to illustrate meaning	Begins to <u>create more novel sentences</u> ; speech in interpersonal and classroom discussions is <u>frequently interrupted by a search for the correct manner of expression</u>	Speech in interpersonal and classroom discussions is <u>generally fluent</u> , with <u>occasional lapses</u> while the student searches for the correct manner of expression	Speech in interpersonal conversation and in classroom discussions is approximately that of <u>a native speaker of the same age</u>

Fluency refers to the degree to which spoken language appears smooth, effortless, and natural. The qualities of language that contribute to fluency include native-like use of pausing, rhythm, intonation, emphasis, rate of speaking, and use of interjections and interruptions. In second language teaching, **fluency** refers to the ability to produce continuous speech without causing comprehension difficulties or a breakdown of communication. Sometimes confused with accuracy, fluency refers to the **flow** of language rather than to its correctness.

LEVEL 0: A student at this level demonstrates no proficiency in language flow. The student may actually speak, but with **no predictability or consistency**.

LEVEL 1: At this level, the student’s speech is limited to an exchange of **fixed verbal formulae**; i.e., commonly used words and phrases that are used in everyday situations, such as “Hello,” “Good-bye,” “How are you?”

LEVEL 2: A student at this level uses **familiar sentences with reasonable ease**, although he/she may use **long pauses** or silences and **gestures** to illustrate meaning.

LEVEL 3: At this level, the student has progressed from memorized phrases and expressions to **spontaneously constructed sentences**. She/he begins to create more novel sentences, although speech during interpersonal and classroom discussions is **frequently interrupted by hesitations** while searching for the correct manner of expression.

LEVEL 4: At this level, the student’s speech is **generally fluent** during interpersonal and classroom discussions. The student’s speech is characterized by **occasional lapses and hesitations** while searching for the correct manner of expression. The primary difference between levels 3 and 4 is the progression from “frequent” to “occasional” hesitations in order to search for the correct manner of expression.

LEVEL 5: At this level, a student’s speech during interpersonal conversations and classroom discussions is **approximately equivalent to that of a native speaker of the same age**. Note: a student’s speech should only be compared to that of other students of the same age and/or developmental level.

Vocabulary (Expanded Version)

		LEVEL 0	LEVEL 1	LEVEL 2	LEVEL 3	LEVEL 4	LEVEL 5
PRODUCTION	VOCABULARY	No <u>demonstrated</u> proficiency	Has <u>limited command of isolated vocabulary for common objects</u> and activities but comprehensibility is often difficult	Has <u>command of words for common objects/activities</u> but <u>choice of words is often inappropriate</u> for the situation/context; comprehensibility remains difficult	Has adequate vocabulary to permit somewhat <u>limited discussion of interpersonal and classroom topics</u> ; <u>usually comprehensible</u>	Flow of speech is <u>rarely interrupted</u> by inadequate vocabulary; is <u>capable of rephrasing ideas</u> and thoughts to express meaning	Use of vocabulary and idioms approximates that of <u>a native speaker of the same age</u>

Vocabulary refers to a student’s understanding and appropriate use of the components of language that convey information and/or meaning. The smallest unit of meaning in a language is called a “lexeme,” or lexical item, which may either be a single word (“book”), or suffix (“-s”), or prefix (“re-”). In addition, this dimension of the MELA-O Scoring Matrix includes understanding of compound words and idioms.

LEVEL 0: A student at this level demonstrates no command of vocabulary although she/he may have a **scattered knowledge of random words**.

LEVEL 1: At this level, a student demonstrates a **limited command of isolated vocabulary** for common objects and activities, although comprehensibility is often difficult.

LEVEL 2: A student at this level has command of words for common objects and activities, but his/her **choice of words is often inappropriate** for the situation or context. The student uses an increasing number of words, although often inappropriately, and **comprehensibility remains difficult**.

LEVEL 3: At this level, the student has **adequate vocabulary to permit somewhat limited discussion** of a wide range of interpersonal and classroom topics and is **usually comprehensible**. The primary difference between levels 2 and 3 is the progression from use of exclusively social vocabulary to incorporate academic vocabulary.

LEVEL 4: A student’s speech at this level is **rarely interrupted by inadequate vocabulary**. The student is capable of rephrasing ideas and thoughts to express meaning and **can say the same thing in several different ways** to clarify meaning.

LEVEL 5: At this level, a student’s **use of vocabulary and idioms approximates that of a native speaker of the same age**. Note: a student’s speech should only be compared with that of native speakers of the same age, since idioms are primarily a function of age and setting.

Pronunciation (Expanded Version)

		LEVEL 0	LEVEL 1	LEVEL 2	LEVEL 3	LEVEL 4	LEVEL 5
PRODUCTION	PRONUNCIATION	No <u>demonstrated</u> proficiency	<u>Seldom intelligible</u> and is <u>strongly influenced by the primary language</u> , including intonation and word stress; must repeat to be understood	<u>Sometimes intelligible</u> ; is frequently influenced by the primary language and must repeat utterances to be understood	<u>Usually speaks intelligibly</u> , with some sounds still influenced by the primary language; frequently uses non-native intonation patterns	<u>Always intelligible</u> with <u>occasional inappropriate intonation patterns</u> ; slight influence of the primary language may still be noticeable	Pronunciation and intonation approximate those of <u>a native speaker of the same age</u>

Pronunciation refers to the student’s proficiency in producing sound, or a group of sounds, in order to convey meaning. Pronunciation includes the intonation, rhythm, emphasis, and juncture (pauses) of a language. For MELA-O, pronunciation focuses primarily on the intelligibility, or perception, of the sounds by the listener, rather than on the “articulation” or production of actual speech sounds in the mouth.

LEVEL 0: A student at this level has **no demonstrated proficiency**. The student observation may have been too brief, or the student may not have produced sufficient language to rate this dimension.

LEVEL 1: At this level, a student is **seldom intelligible** and is **strongly influenced by his/her primary language**, including intonation and word emphasis. The student must repeat in order to be understood.

LEVEL 2: A student at this level is **sometimes intelligible** and is frequently influenced by the primary language. He/she must repeat utterances to be understood. At this level, there will be many primary language sounds and intonation patterns affecting the student’s production. The primary difference between levels 1 and 2 is that the student is more intelligible at level 2 than at level 1.

LEVEL 3: At this level, the student **usually speaks intelligibly**, with some sounds still influenced by the primary language. She/he frequently uses first language intonation patterns, but is now generally understood.

LEVEL 4: A student at this level is **always intelligible**, but with **occasional inappropriate intonation** patterns. Slight influences from the student’s primary language may still be heard, but the student can always be understood.

LEVEL 5: At this level, a student’s **pronunciation and intonation approximate those of a native speaker** of the same age. Some students may never reach this level, always retaining pronunciation and intonation patterns influenced by their primary language. This, however, does not preclude their academic success.

Grammar (Expanded Version)

		LEVEL 0	LEVEL 1	LEVEL 2	LEVEL 3	LEVEL 4	LEVEL 5
PRODUCTION	GRAMMAR	No <u>demonstrated</u> proficiency	Produces only <u>memorized grammar and word order forms</u>	Often uses basic grammar patterns correctly in <u>simple, familiar phrases and sentences</u> ; rarely or seldom attempts complex sentences	Uses basic grammar correctly; attempts complex sentences, but complex language structures are often incorrect	May make limited minor grammatical errors, but <u>they do not obscure meaning</u>	Grammatical usage approximates that of <u>a native speaker of the same age</u>

Grammar refers to the way in which linguistic units, such as words and phrases, are combined to produce sentences and streams of speech in a language. Grammar includes not only proper verb tenses and subject-verb agreement, but also sentence complexity, word order, and the way in which words connect with one another (e.g., pronouns to their antecedents).

LEVEL 0: At this level, the student demonstrates **no proficiency in grammar**. He/she may produce **isolated words and phrases**, but they do not reflect grammatical patterns.

LEVEL 1: A student at this level produces **only memorized grammar and word order forms**, using grammar correctly only in basic phrases and sentences and in verbal rituals or formulae (e.g., “How are you?” or “That’s all for now.”).

LEVEL 2: At this level, a student **often uses basic grammar patterns correctly** in simple, familiar phrases and sentences. Student rarely or **seldom attempts complex sentences**.

LEVEL 3: A student at this level **uses basic grammar correctly**. She/he also **attempts complex language**, but those structures are **often incorrect**.

LEVEL 4: A student at this level may make **limited, minor grammatical errors**, but they do not obscure meaning. His/her grammar errors do not interrupt the flow of speech, nor do they confuse the intended meaning of the utterances.

LEVEL 5: At this level, a student’s **grammatical usage approximates that of a native speaker of the same age**. Note: the development of language patterns proceeds through developmental stages for **both** native English speakers and English language learners.

MELA-O Forms

Notes on Student's Performance in Each Area

Name of Student _____

Comprehension Notes/Evidence:

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Fluency:

Vocabulary:

Pronunciation:

Grammar:

Summary of Student's MELA-O Rating

Student's Name _____	Grade _____	Age _____
SASID _____		
School Name _____		
QMA/QMT Name _____		
School Year _____	Observation Date _____	

COMPREHENSION (CIRCLE ONE RATING BELOW)

0 1 2 3 4 5

Comments:

PRODUCTION (CIRCLE ONE RATING IN EACH OF THE FOLLOWING DIMENSIONS)

FLUENCY

0 1 2 3 4 5

VOCABULARY

0 1 2 3 4 5

PRONUNCIATION

0 1 2 3 4 5

GRAMMAR

0 1 2 3 4 5

Comments: _____
