

3 Common Reference Levels

3.1 Criteria for descriptors for Common Reference Levels

One of the aims of the Framework is to help partners to describe the levels of proficiency required by existing standards, tests and examinations in order to facilitate comparisons between different systems of qualifications. For this purpose the Descriptive Scheme and the Common Reference Levels have been developed. Between them they provide a conceptual grid which users can exploit to describe their system. Ideally a scale of reference levels in a common framework should meet the following four criteria. Two relate to description issues, and two relate to measurement issues:

Description Issues

- A common framework scale should be *context-free* in order to accommodate generalisable results from different specific contexts. That is to say that a common scale should not be produced specifically for, let us say, the school context and then applied to adults, or vice-versa. Yet at the same time the descriptors in a common Framework scale need to be *context-relevant*, relatable to or translatable into each and every relevant context – and appropriate for the function they are used for in that context. This means that the categories used to describe what learners can do in different contexts of use must be relatable to the target contexts of use of the different groups of learners within the overall target population.
- The description also needs to be *based on theories* of language competence. This is difficult to achieve because the available theory and research is inadequate to provide a basis for such a description. Nevertheless, the categorisation and description needs to be theoretically grounded. In addition, whilst relating to theory, the description must also remain *user-friendly* – accessible to practitioners. It should encourage them to think further about what competence means in their context.

Measurement Issues

- The points on the scale at which particular activities and competences are situated in a common framework scale should be *objectively determined* in that they are based on a theory of measurement. This is in order to avoid systematising error through adopting unfounded conventions and ‘rules of thumb’ from the authors, particular groups of practitioners or existing scales that are consulted.
- The *number of levels* adopted should be adequate to show progression in different sectors, but, in any particular context, should not exceed the number of levels between which people are capable of making reasonably consistent distinctions. This may mean adopting different sizes of scale step for different dimensions, or a

two-tier approach between broader (common, conventional) and narrower (local, pedagogic) levels.

These criteria are very difficult to meet, but are useful as a point of orientation. They can in fact be met by a combination of intuitive, qualitative and quantitative methods. This is in contrast to the purely intuitive ways in which scales of language proficiency are normally developed. Intuitive, committee authorship may work well for the development of systems for particular contexts, but have certain limitations in relation to the development of a common framework scale. The main weakness of reliance on intuition is that the placement of a particular wording at a particular level is subjective. Secondly there is also the possibility that users from different sectors may have valid differences of perspective due to the needs of their learners. A scale, like a test, has validity in relation to contexts in which it has been shown to work. Validation – which involves some quantitative analysis – is an ongoing and, theoretically never-ending, process. The methodology used in developing the Common Reference Levels, and their illustrative descriptors, has therefore been fairly rigorous. A systematic combination of intuitive, qualitative and quantitative methods was employed. First, the content of existing scales was analysed in relation to categories of description used in the Framework. Then, in an intuitive phase, this material was edited, new descriptors were formulated, and the set discussed by experts. Next a variety of qualitative methods were used to check that teachers could relate to the descriptive categories selected, and that descriptors actually described the categories they were intended to describe. Finally, the best descriptors in the set were scaled using quantitative methods. The accuracy of this scaling has since been checked in replication studies.

Technical issues connected with the development and scaling of descriptions of language proficiency are considered in the appendices. Appendix A gives an introduction to scales and scaling plus methodologies which can be adopted in development. Appendix B gives a brief overview of the Swiss National Science Research Council project which developed the Common Reference Levels, and their illustrative descriptors, in a project covering different educational sectors. Appendices C and D then introduce two related European projects which have since used a similar methodology to develop and validate such descriptors in relation to young adults. In Appendix C the DIALANG project is described. As part of a wider assessment instrument, DIALANG has extended and adapted for self-assessment descriptors from the CEF. In Appendix D the ALTE (Association of Language Testers in Europe) 'Can Do' project is described. This project has developed and validated a large set of descriptors, which can also be related to the Common Reference Levels. These descriptors complement those in the Framework itself in that they are organised in relation to domains of use which are relevant to adults.

The projects described in the appendices demonstrate a very considerable degree of communality with regard both to the Common Reference Levels themselves and to the concepts scaled to different levels in the illustrative descriptors. That is to say that there is already a growing body of evidence to suggest that the criteria outlined above are at least partially fulfilled.

3.2 The Common Reference Levels

There does appear in practice to be a wide, though by no means universal, consensus on the number and nature of levels appropriate to the organisation of language learning

and the public recognition of achievement. It seems that an outline framework of six broad levels gives an adequate coverage of the learning space relevant to European language learners for these purposes.

- **Breakthrough**, corresponding to what Wilkins in his 1978 proposal labelled ‘*Formulaic Proficiency*’, and Trim in the same publication¹ ‘*Introductory*’.
- **Waystage**, reflecting the Council of Europe content specification.
- **Threshold**, reflecting the Council of Europe content specification.
- **Vantage**, reflecting the third Council of Europe content specification, a level described as ‘*Limited Operational Proficiency*’ by Wilkins, and ‘*adequate response to situations normally encountered*’ by Trim.
- **Effective Operational Proficiency** which was called ‘*Effective Proficiency*’ by Trim, ‘*Adequate Operational Proficiency*’ by Wilkins, and represents an advanced level of competence suitable for more complex work and study tasks.
- **Mastery** (Trim: ‘*comprehensive mastery*’; Wilkins: ‘*Comprehensive Operational Proficiency*’), corresponds to the top examination objective in the scheme adopted by ALTE (Association of Language Testers in Europe). It could be extended to include the more developed intercultural competence above that level which is achieved by many language professionals.

When one looks at these six levels, however, one sees that they are respectively higher and lower interpretations of the classic division into basic, intermediate and advanced. Also, some of the names given to Council of Europe specifications for levels have proved resistant to translation (e.g. *Waystage*, *Vantage*). The scheme therefore proposed adopts a ‘hyper-text’ branching principle, starting from an initial division into three broad levels – A, B and C:

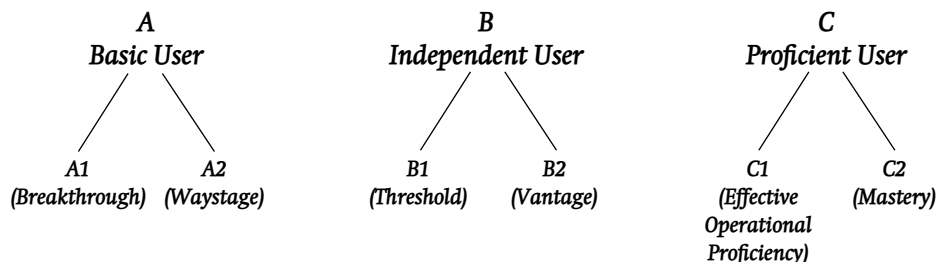


Figure 1

3.3 Presentation of Common Reference Levels

The establishment of a set of common reference points in no way limits how different sectors in different pedagogic cultures may choose to organise or describe their system of levels and modules. It is also to be expected that the precise formulation of the set of common reference points, the wording of the descriptors, will develop over time as the

¹ Trim, J. L. M. 1978 *Some Possible Lines of Development of an Overall Structure for a European Unit Credit Scheme for Foreign Language Learning by Adults*, Council of Europe.

experience of member states and of institutions with related expertise is incorporated into the description.

It is also desirable that the common reference points are presented in different ways for different purposes. For some purposes it will be appropriate to summarise the set of proposed Common Reference Levels in single holistic paragraphs, as shown in Table 1. Such a simple ‘global’ representation will make it easier to communicate the system to non-specialist users and will also provide teachers and curriculum planners with orientation points:

Table 1. *Common Reference Levels: global scale*

Proficient User	C2	Can understand with ease virtually everything heard or read. Can summarise information from different spoken and written sources, reconstructing arguments and accounts in a coherent presentation. Can express him/herself spontaneously, very fluently and precisely, differentiating finer shades of meaning even in more complex situations.
	C1	Can understand a wide range of demanding, longer texts, and recognise implicit meaning. Can express him/herself fluently and spontaneously without much obvious searching for expressions. Can use language flexibly and effectively for social, academic and professional purposes. Can produce clear, well-structured, detailed text on complex subjects, showing controlled use of organisational patterns, connectors and cohesive devices.
Independent User	B2	Can understand the main ideas of complex text on both concrete and abstract topics, including technical discussions in his/her field of specialisation. Can interact with a degree of fluency and spontaneity that makes regular interaction with native speakers quite possible without strain for either party. Can produce clear, detailed text on a wide range of subjects and explain a viewpoint on a topical issue giving the advantages and disadvantages of various options.
	B1	Can understand the main points of clear standard input on familiar matters regularly encountered in work, school, leisure, etc. Can deal with most situations likely to arise whilst travelling in an area where the language is spoken. Can produce simple connected text on topics which are familiar or of personal interest. Can describe experiences and events, dreams, hopes and ambitions and briefly give reasons and explanations for opinions and plans.
Basic User	A2	Can understand sentences and frequently used expressions related to areas of most immediate relevance (e.g. very basic personal and family information, shopping, local geography, employment). Can communicate in simple and routine tasks requiring a simple and direct exchange of information on familiar and routine matters. Can describe in simple terms aspects of his/her background, immediate environment and matters in areas of immediate need.
	A1	Can understand and use familiar everyday expressions and very basic phrases aimed at the satisfaction of needs of a concrete type. Can introduce him/herself and others and can ask and answer questions about personal details such as where he/she lives, people he/she knows and things he/she has. Can interact in a simple way provided the other person talks slowly and clearly and is prepared to help.

In order to orient learners, teachers and other users within the educational system for some practical purpose, however, a more detailed overview is likely to be necessary. Such an overview can be presented in the form of a grid showing major categories of language use at each of the six levels. The example in Table 2 (on the next two pages) is a draft for a self-assessment orientation tool based on the six levels. It is intended to help learners to profile their main language skills, and decide at which level they might look at a checklist of more detailed descriptors in order to self-assess their level of proficiency.

For other purposes, it may be desirable to focus on a particular spectrum of levels, and a particular set of categories. By restricting the range of levels and categories covered to those relevant to a particular purpose, it will be possible to add more detail: finer levels and categories. Such detail would enable a set of modules to be ‘mapped’ relative to one another – and also to be situated in relation to the Common Framework.

Alternatively, rather than profiling categories of communicative activities, one may wish to assess a performance on the basis of the aspects of communicative language competence one can deduce from it. The chart in Table 3 was designed to assess spoken performances. It focuses on different qualitative aspects of language use.

3.4 Illustrative descriptors

The three tables used to introduce the Common Reference Levels (Tables 1, 2 and 3) are summarised from a bank of ‘illustrative descriptors’ developed and validated for the CEF in the research project described in Appendix B. These formulations have been mathematically scaled to these levels by analysing the way in which they have been interpreted in the assessment of large numbers of learners.

For ease of consultation, scales of descriptors are juxtaposed to the relevant categories of the descriptive scheme in Chapters 4 and 5. The descriptors refer to the following three metacategories in the descriptive scheme:

Communicative activities

‘Can Do’ descriptors are provided for reception, interaction and production. There may not be descriptors for all sub-categories for every level, since some activities cannot be undertaken until a certain level of competence has been reached, whilst others may cease to be an objective at higher levels.

Strategies

‘Can Do’ descriptors are provided for some of the strategies employed in performing communicative activities. Strategies are seen as a hinge between the learner’s resources (competences) and what he/she can do with them (communicative activities). The principles of a) planning action, b) balancing resources and compensating for deficiencies during execution and c) monitoring results and undertaking repair as necessary are described in the sections dealing with interaction and production strategies in Chapter 4.

Table 2. Common Reference Levels: self-assessment grid

		A1	A2	B1
U N D E R S T A N D I N G	Listening	I can recognise familiar words and very basic phrases concerning myself, my family and immediate concrete surroundings when people speak slowly and clearly.	I can understand phrases and the highest frequency vocabulary related to areas of most immediate personal relevance (e.g. very basic personal and family information, shopping, local area, employment). I can catch the main point in short, clear, simple messages and announcements.	I can understand the main points of clear standard speech on familiar matters regularly encountered in work, school, leisure, etc. I can understand the main point of many radio or TV programmes on current affairs or topics of personal or professional interest when the delivery is relatively slow and clear.
	Reading	I can understand familiar names, words and very simple sentences, for example on notices and posters or in catalogues.	I can read very short, simple texts. I can find specific, predictable information in simple everyday material such as advertisements, prospectuses, menus and timetables and I can understand short simple personal letters.	I can understand texts that consist mainly of high frequency everyday or job-related language. I can understand the description of events, feelings and wishes in personal letters.
S P E A K I N G	Spoken Interaction	I can interact in a simple way provided the other person is prepared to repeat or rephrase things at a slower rate of speech and help me formulate what I'm trying to say. I can ask and answer simple questions in areas of immediate need or on very familiar topics.	I can communicate in simple and routine tasks requiring a simple and direct exchange of information on familiar topics and activities. I can handle very short social exchanges, even though I can't usually understand enough to keep the conversation going myself.	I can deal with most situations likely to arise whilst travelling in an area where the language is spoken. I can enter unprepared into conversation on topics that are familiar, of personal interest or pertinent to everyday life (e.g. family, hobbies, work, travel and current events).
	Spoken Production	I can use simple phrases and sentences to describe where I live and people I know.	I can use a series of phrases and sentences to describe in simple terms my family and other people, living conditions, my educational background and my present or most recent job.	I can connect phrases in a simple way in order to describe experiences and events, my dreams, hopes and ambitions. I can briefly give reasons and explanations for opinions and plans. I can narrate a story or relate the plot of a book or film and describe my reactions.
W R I T I N G	Writing	I can write a short, simple postcard, for example sending holiday greetings. I can fill in forms with personal details, for example entering my name, nationality and address on a hotel registration form.	I can write short, simple notes and messages relating to matters in areas of immediate need. I can write a very simple personal letter, for example thanking someone for something.	I can write simple connected text on topics which are familiar or of personal interest. I can write personal letters describing experiences and impressions.

B2	C1	C2
<p>I can understand extended speech and lectures and follow even complex lines of argument provided the topic is reasonably familiar. I can understand most TV news and current affairs programmes. I can understand the majority of films in standard dialect.</p>	<p>I can understand extended speech even when it is not clearly structured and when relationships are only implied and not signalled explicitly. I can understand television programmes and films without too much effort.</p>	<p>I have no difficulty in understanding any kind of spoken language, whether live or broadcast, even when delivered at fast native speed, provided I have some time to get familiar with the accent.</p>
<p>I can read articles and reports concerned with contemporary problems in which the writers adopt particular attitudes or viewpoints. I can understand contemporary literary prose.</p>	<p>I can understand long and complex factual and literary texts, appreciating distinctions of style. I can understand specialised articles and longer technical instructions, even when they do not relate to my field.</p>	<p>I can read with ease virtually all forms of the written language, including abstract, structurally or linguistically complex texts such as manuals, specialised articles and literary works.</p>
<p>I can interact with a degree of fluency and spontaneity that makes regular interaction with native speakers quite possible. I can take an active part in discussion in familiar contexts, accounting for and sustaining my views.</p>	<p>I can express myself fluently and spontaneously without much obvious searching for expressions. I can use language flexibly and effectively for social and professional purposes. I can formulate ideas and opinions with precision and relate my contribution skilfully to those of other speakers.</p>	<p>I can take part effortlessly in any conversation or discussion and have a good familiarity with idiomatic expressions and colloquialisms. I can express myself fluently and convey finer shades of meaning precisely. If I do have a problem I can backtrack and restructure around the difficulty so smoothly that other people are hardly aware of it.</p>
<p>I can present clear, detailed descriptions on a wide range of subjects related to my field of interest. I can explain a viewpoint on a topical issue giving the advantages and disadvantages of various options.</p>	<p>I can present clear, detailed descriptions of complex subjects integrating sub-themes, developing particular points and rounding off with an appropriate conclusion.</p>	<p>I can present a clear, smoothly flowing description or argument in a style appropriate to the context and with an effective logical structure which helps the recipient to notice and remember significant points.</p>
<p>I can write clear, detailed text on a wide range of subjects related to my interests. I can write an essay or report, passing on information or giving reasons in support of or against a particular point of view. I can write letters highlighting the personal significance of events and experiences.</p>	<p>I can express myself in clear, well-structured text, expressing points of view at some length. I can write about complex subjects in a letter, an essay or a report, underlining what I consider to be the salient issues. I can select style appropriate to the reader in mind.</p>	<p>I can write clear, smoothly flowing text in an appropriate style. I can write complex letters, reports or articles which present a case with an effective logical structure which helps the recipient to notice and remember significant points. I can write summaries and reviews of professional or literary works.</p>

Table 3. Common Reference Levels: qualitative aspects of spoken language use

	RANGE	ACCURACY	FLUENCY	INTERACTION	COHERENCE
C2	Shows great flexibility reformulating ideas in differing linguistic forms to convey finer shades of meaning precisely, to give emphasis, to differentiate and to eliminate ambiguity. Also has a good command of idiomatic expressions and colloquialisms.	Maintains consistent grammatical control of complex language, even while attention is otherwise engaged (e.g. in forward planning, in monitoring others' reactions).	Can express him/herself spontaneously at length with a natural colloquial flow, avoiding or backtracking around any difficulty so smoothly that the interlocutor is hardly aware of it.	Can interact with ease and skill, picking up and using non-verbal and intonational cues apparently effortlessly. Can interweave his/her contribution into the joint discourse with fully natural turntaking, referencing, allusion making, etc.	Can create coherent and cohesive discourse making full and appropriate use of a variety of organisational patterns and a wide range of connectors and other cohesive devices.
C1	Has a good command of a broad range of language allowing him/her to select a formulation to express him/herself clearly in an appropriate style on a wide range of general, academic, professional or leisure topics without having to restrict what he/she wants to say.	Consistently maintains a high degree of grammatical accuracy; errors are rare, difficult to spot and generally corrected when they do occur.	Can express him/herself fluently and spontaneously, almost effortlessly. Only a conceptual difficulty subject can hinder a natural, smooth flow of language.	Can select a suitable phrase from a readily available range of discourse functions to preface his remarks in order to get or to keep the floor and to relate his/her own contributions skilfully to those of other speakers.	Can produce clear, smoothly flowing, well-structured speech, showing controlled use of organisational patterns, connectors and cohesive devices.
B2+					
B2	Has a sufficient range of language to be able to give clear descriptions, express viewpoints on most general topics, without much conspicuous searching for words, using some complex sentence forms to do so.	Shows a relatively high degree of grammatical control. Does not make errors which cause misunderstanding, and can correct most of his/her mistakes.	Can produce stretches of language with a fairly even tempo; although he/she can be hesitant as he/she searches for patterns and expressions. There are few noticeably long pauses.	Can initiate discourse, take his/her turn when appropriate and end conversation when he/she needs to, though he/she may not always do this elegantly. Can help the discussion along on familiar ground confirming comprehension, inviting others in, etc.	Can use a limited number of cohesive devices to link his/her utterances into clear, coherent discourse, though there may be some 'jumpiness' in a long contribution.

B1+						
B1	Has enough language to get by, with sufficient vocabulary to express him/herself with some hesitation and circumlocutions on topics such as family, hobbies and interests, work, travel, and current events.	Uses reasonably accurately a repertoire of frequently used 'routines' and patterns associated with more predictable situations.	Can keep going comprehensibly, even though pausing for grammatical and lexical planning and repair is very evident, especially in longer stretches of free production.	Can initiate, maintain and close simple face-to-face conversation on topics that are familiar or of personal interest. Can repeat back part of what someone has said to confirm mutual understanding.	Can link a series of shorter, discrete simple elements into a connected, linear sequence of points.	
A2+						
A2	Uses basic sentence patterns with memorised phrases, groups of a few words and formulae in order to communicate limited information in simple everyday situations.	Uses some simple structures correctly, but still systematically makes basic mistakes.	Can make him/herself understood in very short utterances, even though pauses, false starts and reformulation are very evident.	Can answer questions and respond to simple statements. Can indicate when he/she is following but is rarely able to understand enough to keep his/her own accord.	Can link groups of words with simple connectors like 'and', 'but' and 'because'.	
A1	Has a very basic repertoire of words and simple phrases related to personal details and particular concrete situations.	Shows only limited control of a few simple grammatical structures and sentence patterns in a memorised repertoire.	Can manage very short, isolated, mainly pre-packaged utterances, with much pausing to search for expressions, to articulate less familiar words, and to repair communication.	Can ask and answer questions about personal details. Can interact in a simple way but communication is totally dependent on repetition, rephrasing and repair.	Can link words or groups of words with very basic linear connectors like 'and' or 'then'.	