



Use of the CEFR in higher education: Developing descriptors of academic English

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BALEAP 2017 – University of Bristol

Outline

- The CEFR: Brief introduction
- The CEFR: Critical review
- The GSE: Adapting and extending the CEFR
- The GSE Learning Objectives for Academic English





The CEFR aims

The CEFR was published by the Council of Europe in 2001 with three main aims (North, 2007):

- **"To establish a metalanguage** common across educational sectors, national and linguistic boundaries that could be used to talk about objectives and language levels".
- "To encourage practitioners in the language field **to reflect on** their **current practice**, particularly in relation to learners' practical language learning needs, the setting of suitable objectives and the tracking of learner progress".
- **"To agree common reference points** based on the work on objectives that had taken place in the Council of Europe's Modern Languages projects since the 1970s".



Some history

- "Specifications" of language abilities (70's): Threshold¹; Waystage²; Vantage³
- **Rüschlikon symposium** (1991) commissioning the development of a Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR) for language learning at all levels
- The SNSF research project (1993-1996): a Swiss project to create descriptors of language proficiency (*North, 1995; 2000; Schneider & North, 2000*)

1 Van Ek & Trim, 1975; 1991 2 Van Ek & Trim, 1990 3 Van Ek & Trim, 2001

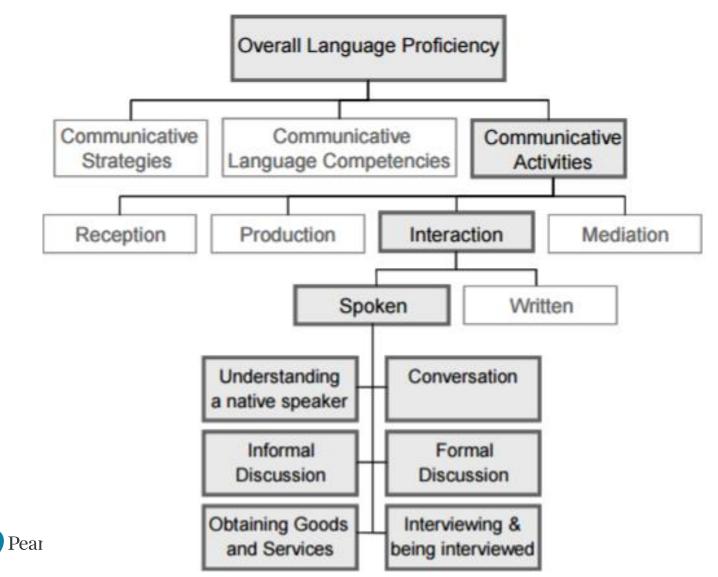
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The structure of the framework

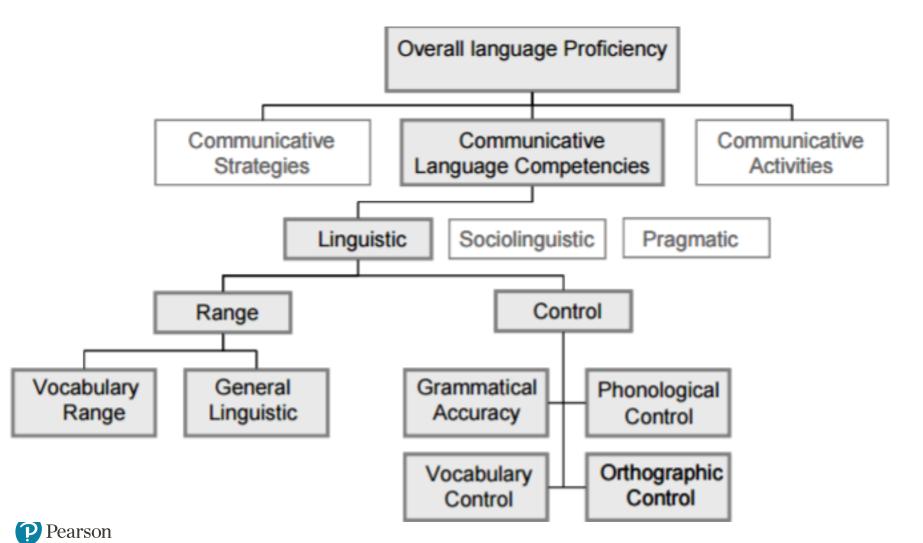
- A set of common reference levels defining learning proficiency in six levels (A1/A2 "basic", B1/B2 "independent", and C1/C2 "proficient") using illustrative descriptors or can do statements
- A descriptive scheme of the action-oriented approach used in the CEFR:

Language use, embracing language learning, comprises the actions performed by persons who as individuals and as social agents develop a range of competences, both general and in particular communicative language competences. They draw on the competences at their disposal in various contexts under various conditions and under various constraints to engage in language activities involving language processes to produce and/or receive texts in relation to themes in specific domains, activating those strategies which seem most appropriate for carrying out the tasks to be accomplished. The monitoring of these actions by the participants leads to the reinforcement or modification of their competences.

The quantity dimension – how many tasks (Council of Europe, 2001)



The quality dimension – how effectively (Council of Europe, 2001)





CEFR – a flexible framework

- The CEFR is **not prescriptive** but it should be (Council of Europe, 2001, pp. 7-8)
 - **multi-purpose:** usable for the full variety of purposes involved in the planning and provision of facilities for language learning
 - **flexible:** adaptable for use in different circumstances
 - open: capable of further extension and refinement
 - **dynamic**: in continuous evolution in response to experience in its use
 - **user-friendly:** presented in a form readily understandable and usable by those to whom it is addressed
 - **non-dogmatic:** not irrevocably and exclusively attached to any one of a number of competing linguistic or educational theories or practices.



How easy to use is the CEFR?

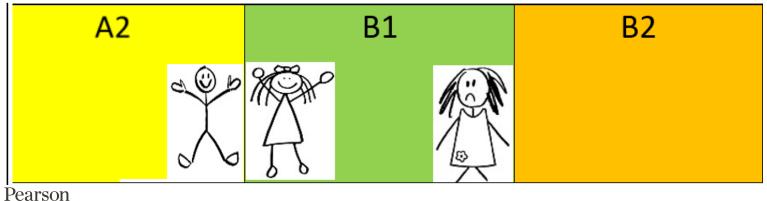
- Not every element in a descriptor is repeated at the next level
- Not every level is described on all scales

"If users of the Framework wish to exploit the descriptor bank they will need to take a view on the question of what to do about gaps in the descriptors provided. **It may well be the case that gaps can be plugged by further elaboration in the context concerned, and/or by merging material from the user's own system**." (Council of Europe, 2001, p.37)



The CEFR – some gaps

- Uneven distribution of descriptors across the four skills – given that a large part (65%) of information is about Speaking
- Lack of descriptors at the lower and higher levels (A1, C1, C2) and no information below A1
- Very little information about other domains of use of language, e.g. the professional or academic domain
- Too wide bands (A1-C2) and opaque meaning of bands



The GSE: adapting and extending the CEFR



The Global Scale of English

- Originally developed as the **reporting scale of PTE Academic**
- A granular scale to measure English proficiency ranging from 10 to 90 **based on the original CEFR proficiency scale**

Global Scale of English			60 70	
CEFR			B2 +	

• A standardised metric based on thousands of descriptors collected by Pearson during an ongoing research



Procedure: Taking the CEFR back to a granular scale

			85—	C2
LOGIT	CEFR		76 —	C1
>3.80	Mastery	C2	jlisl	B2+
2.80	Operational eff.	C1	Ц Ц Ц	B2
1.74 0.72	Vantage	B2+	Scale of English	B1+ B1
-0.26 -1.23	Threshold	B1+		A2+ A2
-2 21 -3.23	Waystage	A2+ A2	1 30-	A1
-4.29	Breakthrough	A1	10	<mark><</mark> A1
-5.39	`Tourist'			7

The GSE Learning Objectives

LOs for adult learners of General English

 Can follow short, simple written directions (e.g. to go from X to Y) - GSE 22-29/A1+ READING

LOs for adult learners of Academic English

• Can explain key information in graphs and charts, using simple language GSE 43-50/B1 SPEAKING

LOs for adult learners of Professional English

 Can understand standard emails on work-related topics – GSE 43-50/B1 READING

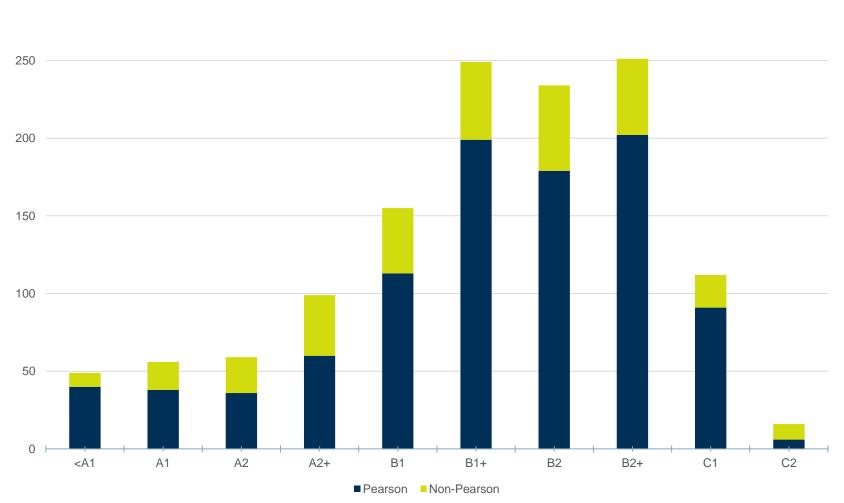
LOs for Young learners

 Can understand simple spoken commands as part of a game – GSE 10-21/below A1 LISTENING



Pearson additional descriptors

GSE Learning Objectives by CEFR level



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300

The GSE Learning Objectives: Developing descriptors of Academic English

How suitable is the CEFR in higher education?

- The descriptive scheme of the CEFR contextualises language activities in four domains: the public domain, the personal domain, the educational domain, and the occupational domain" (CoE, 2001, p. 14).
- However, only a few descriptors cover the academic context of use.



"Academic" descriptors in the CEFR

- The majority (8) of the descriptors are placed at level B2 and a minority (5) at level C1, none at Level C2.
 - Can understand recordings in standard dialect likely to be encountered in social, professional or academic life and identify speaker viewpoints and attitudes as well as the information content.
 - Can follow the essentials of lectures, talks and reports and other forms of academic/professional presentation which are propositionally and linguistically complex.



The GSE Learning Objectives for Academic English

- The GSE Learning Objectives for Academic English (over 300) address the needs of learners in the educational domain, with a focus on academic study at the tertiary/post-secondary level.
- Since all learners need to acquire a core of proficiency in English, the GSE Learning Objectives for Academic English are presented together with the learning objectives developed for adult learners of general English (over 700).



GSE Learning Objectives creation

GAPS IDENTIFIED:

New Learning Objectives (LOs) are written.

INTERNAL WORKSHOPS:

New LOs are reviewed and refined.

EAP TEACHER RATINGS:

Hundreds of teachers worldwide rate the new LOs on the GSE & CEFR.

STATISTICAL ANALYSIS & IRT MODELLING:

Problematic LOs are removed, revised, and rerated. LOs are calibrated to the CEFR & GSE/

FINAL QUALITATIVE REVIEW: GSE values are sense-checked by content editors.

Sourcing descriptors

The GSE Learning Objectives for Academic English were mainly sourced from:

• Ministry guidelines, University syllabuses, British and American English course materials (e.g. North Star, Academic Connections, Language Leader)

In the published booklets, the Learning Objectives are coded as below:

- (C) Common European Framework descriptor, verbatim, © Council of Europe
- (Ca) Common European Framework descriptor, adapted or edited, ©Council of Europe
- (N2000) North (2000) descriptor, verbatim
- (N2000a) North (2000) descriptor, adapted or edited
- (N2007a) North (2007) expanded set of C1 and C2 descriptors, adapted or edited
- Pearson New Pearson descriptor

Creating descriptors: guidelines

- <u>Performance</u>: the language performance itself
 - E.g., <u>Can write a review of a simple text</u>, using appropriate conventions, if provided with a model [GSE 52, range 51-58, B1+, Writing]: what someone can do
- <u>Criteria</u>: the intrinsic quality of the performance
 - E.g., Can write a review of a simple text, <u>using appropriate</u> <u>conventions</u>, if provided with a model [GSE 52, range 51-58, B1+, Writing]: how well someone can do something
- <u>Conditions</u>: any extrinsic **constraints or conditions** defining the performance
 - E.g., Can write a review of a simple text, using appropriate conventions, <u>if provided with a model [GSE 52</u>, range 51-58, B1+, Writing]

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Rating descriptors

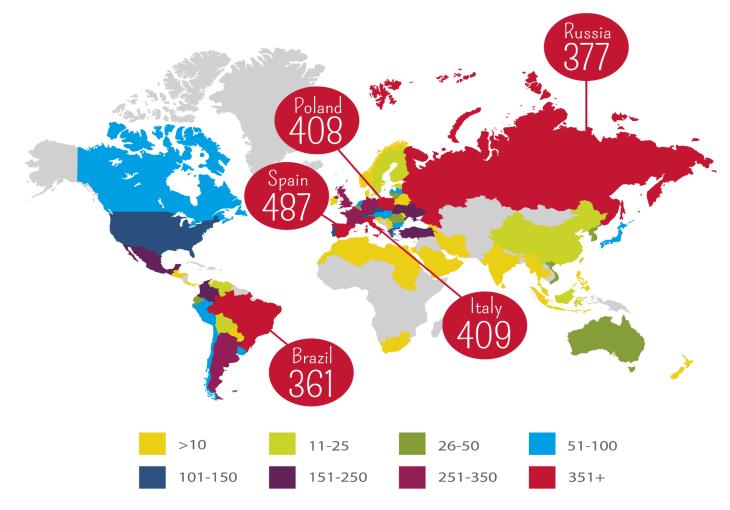
- A set of GSE Learning Objectives for rating typically included around 100 new GSE Learning Objectives and 20 anchor items
- The anchor items were Can Do statements taken from North's original research (2000) and therefore with known difficulty values on the CEFR scale
- Each set of learning objectives **covered all four skills as** well as a range of predicted CEFR levels.
- They were presented to raters by skill, in a random order.



Raters

- **Expert raters** (around 80 -100 per batch):
 - at least 2 years teaching experience with target learner group
 - knowledgeable on the CEFR
 - attended training workshops
 - rated a full set (120) of descriptors on the CEFR and GSE
- Online raters (about 500 per batch)
 - at least 2 years teaching experience with target learner group
 - some familiarity with the CEF
 - attended online training sessions
 - rated sets of 30-40 descriptors on the CEFR scale only

Global research: over 6,000 teachers across 50 countries





Sample training task (for experts)

SAMPLE DESCRIPTOR

Can make an effective summary and conclusion to a presentation.

- First, decide which CEFR level you think a student would need to be at in order to have a 50% chance of successfully completing the task
- Then, decide where within that level you think the learning objective sits. Use the GSE value to indicate start, middle or end
- Answer, e.g.: B2 [=GSE 59-66] → 65

Global Scale of English	10 20	3	30 40	50	60 70	80	90 II
CEFR	<a1< td=""><td>A1</td><td>A2 +</td><td>B1 ⁺</td><td>B2 +</td><td>C1</td><td>C2</td></a1<>	A1	A2 +	B1 ⁺	B2 +	C1	C2

Statistical analyis (Prof. John de Jong)

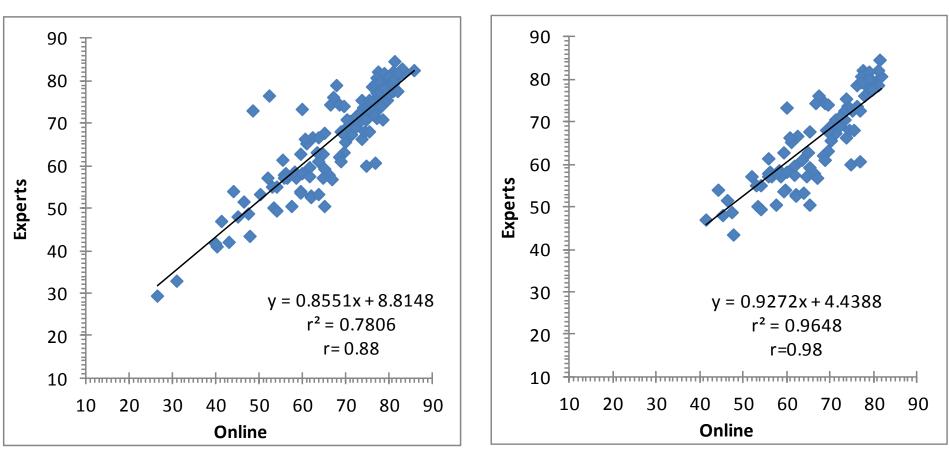
- Statistical analysis and data cleaning to remove
 - "Misfitting" raters, e.g. raters who rated less than 75% descriptors and/or with a low SD and/or with an average score which was too distant from the group average
 - **"Poor" Learning Objectives**, e.g. descriptors with an overall degree of rater agreement <.70



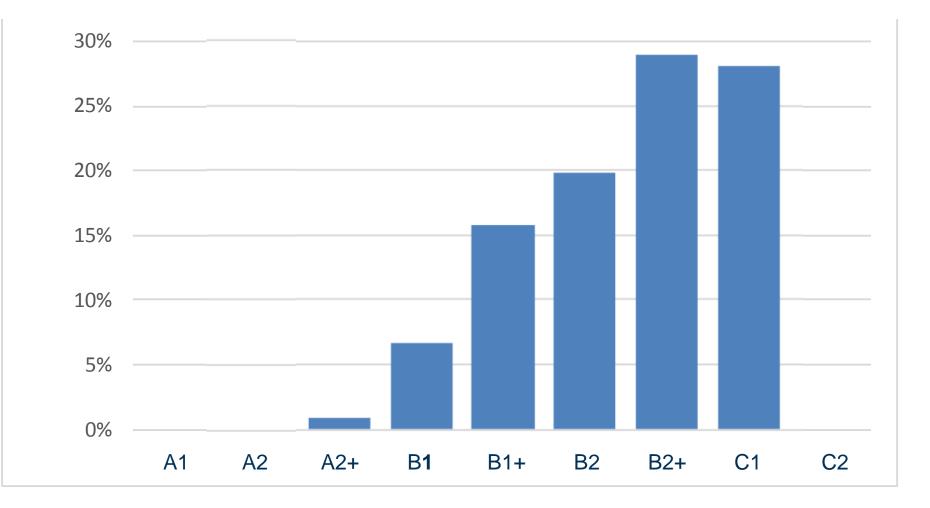
Agreement between Expert and Online raters

Prior to data cleaning

After data cleaning



Distribution of Academic Learning Objectives (n 337)

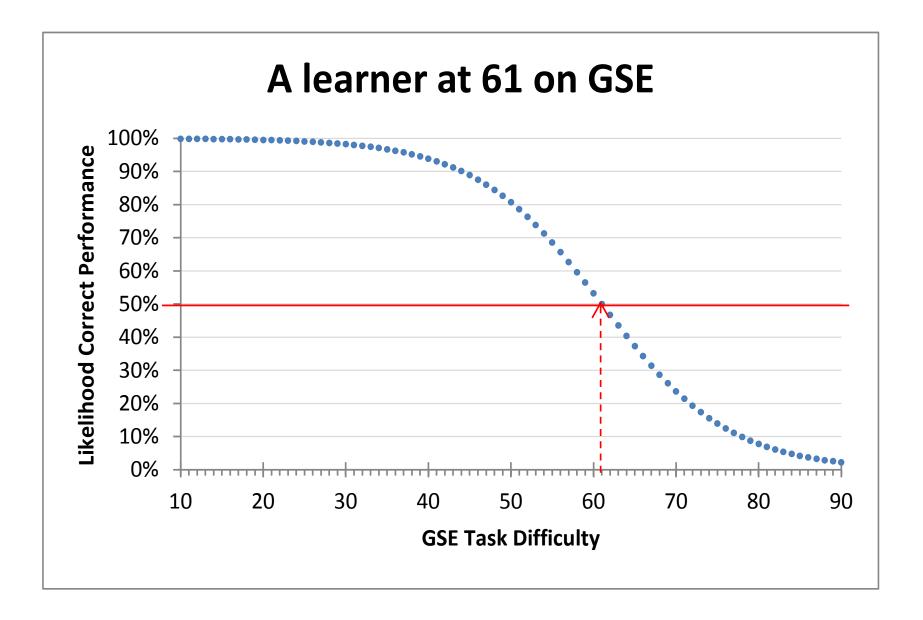




Calibrated descriptors - Examples

S	Descriptor	GSE	CEFR	Agree	z-dif
L	Can recognise markers that introduce supporting examples.	57	B1+	0.87	0.23
L	Can recognise markers that signal the main parts of a lecture.	57	B1+	0.85	-0.16
R	Can evaluate information in an academic text using specific criteria.	75	B2+	0.91	0.80
R	Can identify examples from an academic text to support an argument.	69	B2+	0.85	-1.46
S	Can effectively discuss the meaning and implications of research data.	80	C1	0.85	-0.26
S	Can effectively request information from a professor outside of class.	58	B1+	0.77	0.45
W	Can use appropriate tone and register when writing academic texts.	78	C1	0.89	0.38
W	Can synthesise information from two or more academic texts.	78	C1	0.76	-0.58







Using EAP descriptors in teaching and testing

- In teaching, EAP descriptors could help:
 - apply a systematic and standardized approach to curriculum development
 - bridge the gap between teaching and assessment
- In assessment, EAP descriptors could help:
 - produce more accurate test specifications to describe the content of the test
 - judge performance and progress in relation to scaled learning objectives and therefore give meaning to the scores



(Main) References

- Council of Europe (2001). *Common European Framework of Reference for Languages: Learning, Teaching, Assessment.* Cambridge: CUP.
- Council of Europe (2009). *Relating Language Examinations to the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages: Learning, Teaching, Assessment (CEFR): A Manual.* Strasbourg: Council of Europe Language Policy Division.
- Figueras, N., North, B., Takala, S., Verhelst, N., & Van Avermaet, P. (2005). *Relating examinations to the Common European Framework: a manual*. In Language Testing, 22(3), 261–279.
- North, B. (2000). *The development of a common framework scale of language proficiency*. New York: Peter Lang.
- North B. (2007). The CEFR Common Reference Levels : validated reference points and local strategies. In *Report of the Intergovernmental Policy Forum: The Common European Framework of Reference for languages (CEFR) and the development of language policies : challenges and responsibilities*, 6-8 February 2007, Strasbourg, Council of Europe
- <u>http://www.coe.int/en/web/portfolio/overview-of-cefr-related-scales</u>
- <u>Structured overview of all CEFR scales</u> (2001): a compilation of all the scales from Chapters 3, 4 and 5 of the CEFR.

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For any queries about the GSE Teacher Toolkit, please contact Veronica Benigno at veronica.benigno@pearson.com

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