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Hulstijn, J.H.

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The Common European Framework of Reference for Languages

A challenge for applied linguistics

Jan H. Hulstijn

University of Amsterdam

The Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR, Council of Europe, 2001) currently functions as an instrument for educational policy and practice. The view of language proficiency on which it is based and the six proficiency levels it defines lack empirical support from language-use data. Several issues need to be investigated collaboratively by researchers working in the fields of first and second language acquisition, corpus linguistics and language assessment. These issues are concerned with (i) the CEFR's failure to consistently distinguish between levels of language proficiency (static aspect) and language development (dynamic aspect), (ii) with the CEFR's confounding of levels of language proficiency and intellectual abilities, and (iii) the potential problem of mismatches between second-language learners' communicative and linguistic competences. Furthermore, from a more theoretical perspective, this paper proposes (iv) to investigate which CEFR proficiency levels are attainable by native speakers and (v) to empirically delineate the lexical, morpho-syntactic and pragmatic knowledge shared by all native speakers (called Basic Language Cognition).

Keywords: CEFR, language proficiency

The CEFR in its context of foreign-language education in Europe

The CEFR is a document (freely downloadable from internet) developed and published under the auspices of the Council of Europe. The Council of Europe, not to be confused with the European Union, was founded in 1949 to promote co-operation between all countries of Europe in the areas of human rights, democracy, law, culture and education. It currently has 47 member states with, together, around 800 million citizens. The CEFR is defined by its authors in the following way:

“The Common European Framework provides a common basis for the elaboration of language syllabuses, curriculum guidelines, examinations, textbooks, etc. across Europe. It describes in a comprehensive way what language learners have to learn to do in order to use a language for communication and what knowledge and skills they have to develop so as to be able to act effectively. The description also covers the cultural context in which language is set. The Framework also defines levels of proficiency which allow learners’ progress to be measured at each stage of learning and on a life-long basis.

The Common European Framework is intended to overcome the barriers to communication among professionals working in the field of modern languages arising from the different educational systems in Europe. It provides the means for educational administrators, course designers, teachers, teacher trainers, examining bodies, etc., to reflect on their current practice, with a view to situating and co-ordinating their efforts and to ensuring that they meet the real needs of the learners for whom they are responsible.

By providing a common basis for the explicit description of objectives, content and methods, the Framework will enhance the transparency of courses, syllabuses and qualifications, thus promoting international co-operation in the field of modern languages. The provision of objective criteria for describing language proficiency will facilitate the mutual recognition of qualifications gained in different learning contexts, and accordingly will aid European mobility” (Council of Europe, 2001, p. 1).

The CEFR was published in 2001 but its publication was preceded by a pilot version in 1996 and many other documents that directly or indirectly emanated from a conference held in the Swiss town Rüslikon in 1971, where John Trim, one of the main figures behind the CEFR, presented a plan for implementing a European units/credits system for modern languages in adult education (see Decoo, 2011, Chapter 4, for a detailed description of the history of the CEFR).

The CEFR has become an extremely influential document, not only in Europe but also in other continents, and it has been translated into over 30 languages. Although, in this article, I will raise some serious conceptual problems concerning the CEFR’s notions of levels and components of language proficiency, I would like to express my admiration for the founding fathers of the CEFR, John Trim, Jan van Ek and Daniel Coste, who had the courage to pioneer in an interdisciplinary field of education, psychology and linguistics, in the interest of foreign language learners as social agents, as the following quote illustrates:

“As a social agent, each individual forms relationships with a widening cluster of overlapping social groups, which together define identity. In an intercultural approach, it is a central objective of language education to promote the favourable development of the learner’s whole personality and sense of identity in response

to the enriching experience of otherness in language and culture” (Council of Europe, 2001, p. 1).

The CEFR is best known for its six levels of language proficiency (see below) but it offers much more than that (Little, 2007; Figueras, 2012). It renders a plan for foreign-language education with truly humanistic goals, in an effort “to promote mutual understanding and tolerance, respect for identities and cultural diversity through more effective international communication” (Council of Europe, 2001, p. 3).

To solve educational (and hence political) issues in Europe, *practical* solutions had to be proposed, which necessitated a great deal of theoretical and educational compromising, and that is what Trim and Van Ek did in great sincerity. For this reason alone, they deserve our lasting respect. Trim did not exaggerate when he wrote, in what I believe was his last publication before he passed away in 2013: “It will thus be seen that CEFR represents a significant step forward in a long process of educational reform, firmly rooted in a developmental tradition under a wide range of intellectual, cultural, socio-economic and political influences and pointing to a period of further educational advance” (Trim, 2012, p. 32).

The focus of this article is, however, on the notion of language proficiency, underlying the CEFR and on its six proficiency levels. I will critically examine the CEFR but my intention is not to deconstruct it. Instead, in a constructive approach, departing from the general idea that nothing in life is entirely perfect and that we must seek ways to improve the world, I aim to find elements in the CEFR that should be investigated by researchers of first and second language acquisition (SLA), corpus linguists and researchers in the language-assessment field. I believe that they have much to contribute to an empirical and theoretical underpinning of the CEFR. Making use of ideas offered by others (e.g., Alderson, 2007; De Jong, 2004), this article offers an update and extension of ideas originally presented in earlier papers (Hulstijn, 2007, 2010, 2011, 2012), with special attention to a theory of language proficiency and an agenda for research.¹

The quest for a common core of language proficiency

Trim and Van Ek were fascinated by the quest to identify a “common core” of language use, a construct they operationalized in what was called the Threshold

1. An area of CEFR oriented research not addressed in the present paper is that of characterizing the lexical and morpho-syntactic profiles of L2 learners whose oral or written L2 production has been rated as being at different CEFR proficiency levels. For an overview of work in this area and the methodological difficulties encountered, see the volume edited by Bartning, Martin and Vedder (2010) and Hawkins and Filipović (2012).

Level (Van Ek, 1976). They tried to show that there is indeed a common core of language use and that it can be characterized along two dimensions, which intimately hang together as the two sides of the same coin. The first dimension is what the CEFR calls “language activities” in which language users engage with respect to context of language use, communication themes, and communicative tasks and purposes (Council of Europe, 2001, p. 44–56). Chapter 4 of the CEFR gives descriptions in terms of what L2 users can do (quantity) and how well they can do it (quality). According to De Jong (2004), “quantity refers to the number of domains, functions, notions, situations, locations, topics, and roles that a language user can deal with. The notion of quality refers to (a) the degree to which language use is effective, leading to degree of precision, in understanding what is meant, and in expressing one’s meaning, and (b) the degree to which language use is efficient, leading to communication with least possible effort.”

The second dimension consists of “general competences” (general knowledge, skills and know-how, existential competence, and ability to learn) and “communicative language competences” (Council of Europe, 2001, p. 108) subdivided into linguistic, sociolinguistic, and pragmatic competence (Council of Europe, 2001, p. 110–129).

I suppose that Van Ek and Trim must have felt a great deal of satisfaction when they defined the Threshold Level in this twofold way and I assume that they must have suffered badly from some of the rather acrimonious attacks on it. But this was the feat of two scholars who did *not* have as their goal to produce a falsifiable theory of language use but rather a series of documents that aimed at serving modern-language education in Europe.

In recent years, I have tried to construct a theory of language proficiency (Hulstijn, 2011, book in progress), akin to the notion of common core in the work of Trim and Van Ek. My theory begins with a conceptualization of language proficiency, called ‘language cognition’, not of L2 learners but of adult native speakers. In what follows I will refer to native speakers with the label “L1-ers” and to non-native speakers or L2 learners with the label “L2-ers”. I distinguish between basic language cognition (BLC) and higher or extended language cognition (HLC). In Hulstijn (2011), these constructs are defined as follows:²

“BLC pertains to (1) the largely implicit, unconscious knowledge in the domains of phonetics, prosody, phonology, morphology and syntax, (2) the largely explicit, conscious knowledge in the lexical domain (form-meaning mappings), *in combination with* (3) the automaticity with which these types of knowledge can be

2. The BLC-HLC theory also comprises a distinction between core and peripheral components of language proficiency, but these constructs are not presented here because they are of little importance in the present context.

processed. BLC is restricted to frequent lexical items and frequent grammatical structures, that is, to lexical items and morphosyntactic structures that may occur in any communicative situation, common to all adult L1-ers, regardless of age, literacy, or educational level. The speed with which linguistic information can be processed may change across the life span, increasing first and decreasing later, from the age of around 30 into old age.

BLC's processing dimension reflects the fact that speaking and understanding speech (as well as reading, and writing) involve parallel processing of phonetic-phonological, lexical and grammatical information in high speed. Adult native speakers with normal hearing can speak and understand by a rate of two to three words per second (Levitt, 1989, p.22). Parallel processing, however, comes at the price of momentary disfluences (pauses, repeats, self-corrections) and even uncorrected errors in speech (articulation, lexis, or grammar). Some native speakers are more affected by disfluences and errors in their speech than others (e.g., Goldman-Eisler, 1968).

BLC is restricted to speech reception and speech production; it does not comprise reading and writing. In line with a tradition in linguistics going back to American and European structuralism (Bloomfield, 1933; De Saussure, 1916), I regard the reception and production of speech as a more fundamental human attribute than literacy skills.

HLC is the complement or extension of BLC. (An alternative label of HLC is *extended language cognition*.) HLC is identical to BLC, except that, (1) in HLC, utterances that can be understood or produced contain low-frequency lexical items or uncommon morphosyntactic structures, and that (2) HLC utterances pertain to written as well as spoken language. In other words, HLC utterances are lexically and grammatically more complex (and often longer) than BLC utterances and they need not be spoken. HLC discourse pertains to topics other than simple every-day matters, i.e. topics addressed in school and colleges, on the work floor, and in leisure-time activities."

In Hulstijn (book in progress, Chapter 4), BLC and HLC are visually rendered as in Figure 1.

In summary, BLC is the language knowledge and skills in the oral domain shared by all adult L1-ers, while HLC refers to the linguistic knowledge and skills that some but not all L1-ers have mastered, i.e. the realms where differences between L1-ers are observed. The question that immediately arises, then, is where the borderline between BLC and HLC could lie. Note that the theory conceives of language proficiency not as a continuum but as a dichotomy. This idea is based on the fact that, in the domains of lexis, morpho-syntax and pragmatics, there is a minority of elements (words, constructions, expressions) that occur extremely frequently, while there is a large majority of elements that occur infrequently. This is known as Zipf's law (Zipf, 1935). To put it differently, the BLC-HLC theory

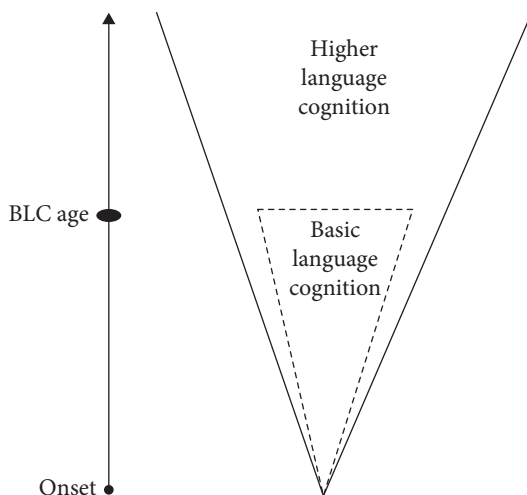


Figure 1. The BLC-HLC model of L1 proficiency. There is no lid on the cone, to indicate the impossibility of defining maximal language cognition. Language development, as indicated by the arrow at the left, is rendered vertically, from bottom to top, where BLC age refers to the age at which L1-ers have acquired BLC. Language attrition (caused by reduced L1 use) is not visualized in this figure. The figure, taken from Chapter 4 of Hulstijn (in progress) is an extension of the figure in Hulstijn (2011, p. 235).

proposes that a unitary notion of “the” native speaker does indeed exist but only in the BLC domain. In the HLC domain, native speakers differ widely from one another.

I wonder whether Trim and Van Ek’s notion of a common core for L2 learners, in particular the activities and language competences associated with oral verbal communication (Threshold Level, B1), although formulated with a different purpose in mind, might come close to my definition of BLC. I believe that this is an empirical issue which applied linguists and SLA researchers hopefully will see as a challenging issue to address in future empirical research. I will return to the BLC-HLC theory later in this paper.

Levels and scales in the CEFR

After their success with defining the Threshold Level, Van Ek and Trim were asked to define more levels, despite their misgivings. In his latest paper, Trim (2012, p. 28) has this to say about this pressure:

“As the threshold level concept became part of mainstream thinking, demand grew for similar specifications at other levels and descriptions were produced using the

same model at Waystage below, and Vantage above Threshold. Practical considerations overrode the theoretical misgivings as to the concept of ‘level’. We used the term ‘level’ originally despite deep misgivings concerning the concept. We could see no reason to break the process of language learning into a series of steps and did not like the image of learning poured into an empty vessel, with skills and knowledge like sand in an hourglass. In a learner-centered approach, the diversity of needs, motivations and characteristics might lead in many different directions. Why force everyone to follow the same set of *gradus ad Parnassum*? However, we thought an exception might be made at the point where the early learning of bits and pieces of language cohered into a generably usable communicative competence, producing a ‘threshold’ effect. Over time, it became apparent that our reasoning took little account of the realities of the social organization of language learning. State education systems were organised into primary, lower secondary and upper secondary, further and higher educational sectors, and their interfaces called for assessments of proficiency that would provide objectives for one sector and starting points for the next. Similarly, the major institutions of adult education had to cater for large numbers of students at different stages of development, to sort them into financially and organizationally viable groups with realistic common objectives.”

The CEFR in its present form distinguishes six proficiency levels, as shown in Figure 2. In the following subsections of this paper, I aim to show how some of the conceptual problems in the CEFR’s level construct can be turned into empirical questions that applied linguists should address.

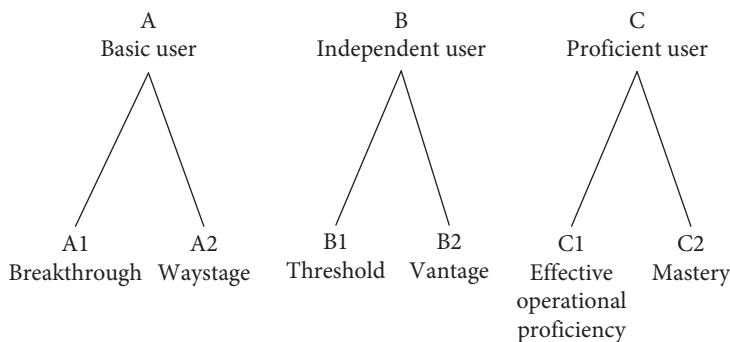


Figure 2. The six levels of the CEFR (Council of Europe, 2001, p.23)

The static and dynamic aspects of levels

The levels descriptions pertain to “an ascending series of common reference levels for describing learner proficiency” (p.16). In addition, as the quote from Trim (2012) already hinted at, the six levels are associated to the notion of L2

development: “Learning which takes place over a period of time needs to be organised into units which take account of progression and can provide continuity” (p. 17). It is important to note that the levels in the CEFR are associated both with proficiency, the static aspect of level, and development, its dynamic aspect. This raises the question of whether it is necessary or indeed possible to conceive of the six CEFR levels as developmental (dynamic). For example, did all L2 learners who find themselves currently at the B1 level, progress through the stages A1 and A2 before they reached B1 (with respect to all activities and competences distinguished in Chapter 4 and 5 of the CEFR)? And is this true for both learners who did and those who did not receive L2 instruction in a school or other educational context? Or is possible to reach B1 (or any other level) directly, bypassing lower CEFR levels? It seems to me that this is an empirical matter, relevant for L2 education as well as for theories of instructed and uninstructed SLA. It might be relevant too for the SLA literature on so called acquisition orders (the order in which different morpho-syntactic structures are acquired; see for example Goldschneider and DeKeyser, 2001) and acquisition sequences (the stages of development in the acquisition of morpho-syntactic forms in one domain, such as negation; see for example Ortega, in press).

How mixed can profiles be?

Chapter 4 of the CEFR, presenting the dimension of language activities, contains 40 scales, each consisting of six levels (A1, A2, B1, B2, C1, and C2), specifying a large number of forms of oral and written language use (pp. 58–84), including several scales of strategic competence. Chapter 5 of the CEFR contains 13 scales for the linguistic, sociolinguistic, and pragmatic competences (pp. 110–129). The same six level indicators (A1, A2, B1, B2, C1, C2) are used in all 40 activity scales (Ch. 4) and all 13 competence scales (Ch. 5). Although the CEFR was not proposed as a testable theory of L2 proficiency, one could in fact derive from it the general claim that being successful in any of the 40 activity scales at a certain level, is not possible with competences on the 13 competency scales at a lower level (Figure 2). For example, the CEFR implicitly claims that being capable of performing at the B1 level of the activity scale Conversation (p. 76) should not be possible with any of the linguistic competences (p. 112–129) at levels lower than B1. Taking this to its extreme, the CEFR actually contains at least 40 (activity scales) x 5 (levels above A1) x 1 (the corresponding level on at least one of the 13 competency scales) = minimally 200 hypotheses to be tested empirically! This surprising feature is the simple result of the fact that the same six labels are used in all 53 scales. In my view, this is one of the most exciting features of the CEFR and a fascinating challenge for SLA researchers. The existence of so-called “uneven profiles” is briefly

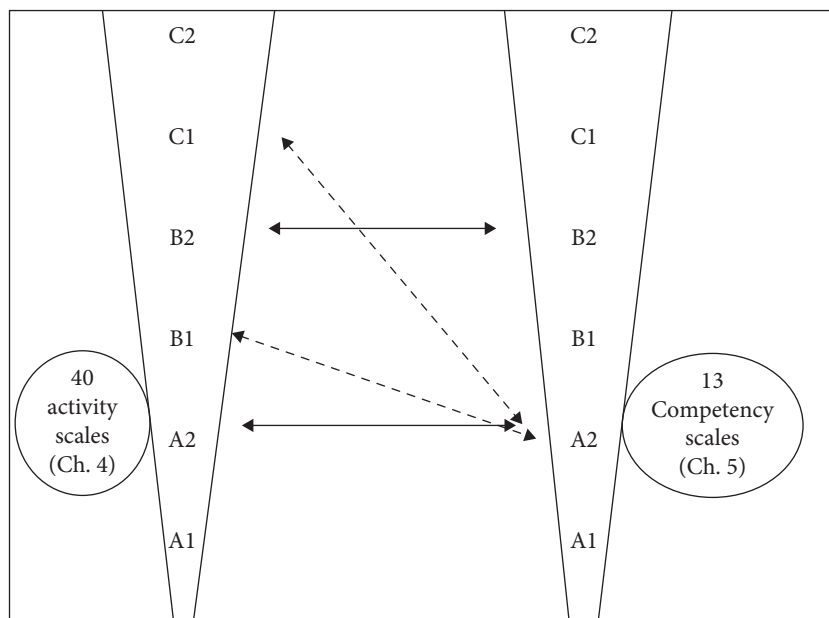


Figure 3. Examples of matching relationships between activities and competences (the two horizontal lines) and of non-matching, possibly impossible relationships (the two diagonal hatched lines)

acknowledged in the CEFR (Council of Europe, 2001, p. 17). As one of the CEFR authors stated (B. North, personal communication with the author of this paper, April 16, 2010), uneven profiles are the rule and flat profiles are the exception. I pointed out in Hulstijn (2011, p. 243) that, if this is so,

“research is needed into the extent to which profiles can actually be uneven. For example, how linguistically imperfect (in terms of vocabulary, grammar, pronunciation/intonation, articulation speed) can performance on a C1 task be without failing as a communicative act, and to what extent can weaknesses in one component of linguistic competence be compensated with strengths in another component at a given CEFR level? These questions appear to be particularly relevant at higher proficiency levels (B2, C1 and C2). Furthermore, research is needed on how little linguistic competence is minimally required to perform tasks at the lower levels (A1, A2 and B1). Vocabulary appears to be the most important linguistic component at the lower levels. But which grammatical and phonotactic elements must a learner minimally control at these levels in the case of languages typologically as divergent as Chinese, Japanese, Finnish and English? Note that research on these questions is particularly needed in the productive skills (speaking and writing).”

The association of CEFR levels with intellectual abilities

In Hulstijn (2011) I pointed to another feature of the CEFR that makes it so intriguing. This feature is concerned with the association between language proficiency levels and the intellectual skills needed to attain the higher CEFR levels, B2, C1, and C1. If one examines the descriptors of the higher levels in the Chapter 4 and 5 scales of the CEFR, one wonders whether higher levels can be attained by people with modest or low intellectual abilities.

For example, the B2 level of the CEFR's first activity scale, Overall Oral Production, describes language use, which, in my opinion, requires higher intellectual skills: "Can give clear, systematically developed descriptions and presentations, with appropriate highlighting of significant points, and relevant supporting detail" (Council of Europe, 2001, p. 58). Similarly, the higher levels of the Vocabulary Range scale — a competence scale — also will normally be attainable only by people with higher levels of education or functioning in higher professions, as is illustrated in the following characterisation of the C1 level: "Has a good command of a broad lexical repertoire allowing gaps to be readily overcome with circumlocutions; little obvious searching for expressions or avoidance strategies. Good command of idiomatic expressions and colloquialisms" (Council of Europe, 2001, p. 112).

It is important to note that the CEFR authors explicitly acknowledge that the C2 level "is not intended to imply native-speaker or near native-speaker competence" (p. 36). In fact, many adult L1-ers will never attain the C1 or C2 levels. In Hulstijn (2011, p. 241) I observed that the CEFR authors "do not explain why this is so, nor do they explicitly acknowledge that the C1 and C2 levels will generally not be attainable by L2 users with educational backgrounds other than higher education. In other words, they fail to consistently distinguish between L2 development and intellectual development, visible in school diplomas and professional career." For language educators it is important to know that the higher CEFR levels are useful in upper secondary and higher education but much less so in the lower streams of vocational education or for language courses for adults with low levels of education. But the association between CEFR levels and intellectual skills is fascinating and challenging, in my view, for researchers of first and second language acquisition and cognition in general. In this respect, it would be fascinating to explore to what extent L1-ers of say 18 years old possess mother tongue proficiency at the B1 level of the communicative (Chapter 4) and linguistic (Chapter 5) CEFR scales. Which proficiency level of which of the 53 scales is attainable for all L1-ers, regardless of their intellectual abilities and educational background? Is this the B1 level? Answers to these and similar questions would increase our understanding of the subtle interplay between nature and nurture factors in language development and verbal communication. Note that most research on L1 acquisition is limited to

studies related to the first ten years of life. Too little research has been conducted on L1 development in adolescents and adults (for reviews, see Berman, 2007, and Nippold, 2006; see also Hulstijn, in progress, Chapter 7).

Convergence and divergence in the CEFR movement

The CEFR document, as published in 2001, provides us with a language-neutral description of language competences (the 13 scales of Chapter 5). Nowhere in these scales is reference made to any particular language. This is both a strength and a weakness. The strength of the language neutrality of the CEFR is that it offers a ‘*tertio comparationis*’, a yardstick with which competences in all (European) languages can be compared. At the same time, however, the competence scales require an additional operationalization, a translation as it were, into each particular language. It is of importance for all professionals and stakeholders in the field (policy makers, syllabus designers, teachers, language testers, and of course L2 learners) that they be provided with information on the exact meaning of, for example, the B1 level of grammatical accuracy, vocabulary range, vocabulary control and phonological control in the language of their concern. Does control of auxiliary-subject-main verb in *Wh* questions in English (‘When will you have finished your homework?’) belong to grammatical control of English at the B1 level? Is *desk* a B1 word? How accurate has the pronunciation of the vowels in *bed* and *bad* have to be at the B1 level? These are questions that the CEFR itself does not answer.

Therefore, it is quite natural that professionals in various European countries have embarked on projects aiming at ‘translating’ the six CEFR levels of the linguistic-competence scales into various languages. The Language Policy unit of the Council of Europe calls these descriptions ‘Reference Level Descriptions’ (RLDs; see <http://www.coe.int/t/dg4/linguistic/dnr_en.asp>). At the time of writing, there are RLDs for ten languages, in less or more detailed form: Czech, English, French, Greek, Georgian, German, Italian, Norwegian, Portuguese, and Spanish. The Council of Europe’s Guide for the production of RLDs (version 2, November 2005, p.6) stipulates that the “production of these RLDs must have official support or backing of a political and scientific nature (Ministry of Education, Foreign Affairs, specialised scientific institute, etc.) to guarantee their legitimacy and dissemination in the educational sector.” Unfortunately, this is not always the case. Decoo (2011) compared 11 inventories of numbers of words in various European languages claimed to be known at the different CEFR levels. The numbers diverged enormously, ranging, for instance for the B1 level (Threshold), between 1,500 and 7,000 lexical items. These findings led Decoo (2011, p. 100) to draw the following conclusion:

“The development of RLDs since 2002 is supposed to provide users with the ‘descriptions’ of language content appropriate for each level (...) A critical analysis reveals that the figures differ spectacularly from one language to another. Moreover, these new inventories seem to simply resurrect Threshold inventories of years before, with only limited adjustments” (Decoo, 2011, p. 100).

Thus, there is an irony in the CEFR history. The Council of Europe was successful, during a period of 25 years, in implementing a development from various language-specific specifications of the Threshold Level in the 1970s towards *convergence*, culminating in the publication of the language-neutral CEFR in 2001. However, the Council has since then recommended and supported initiatives to produce language-specific RLDs, running the risk of *divergence*. One of the main causes of this divergence is that the Council of Europe simply lacks the financial resources necessary to give professional guidance and support in the development of RLDs, monitoring the development of RLDs, and maintaining the CEFR standards by approving high-quality RLDs or rejecting poor-quality RLDs.

A practical solution to the problem of divergence

In my view, a practical short-term solution to the problem of apparent divergence in RLDs of various languages would be to try to reach consensus amongst professionals (applied linguists) about the number of lexical units to be receptively and productively known at the three lowest levels of the CEFR (A1, A2 and B1). The consensus can be based on intersubjective intuitions; it need not necessarily be based on research. First, to simplify a bit, it seems to be less difficult to reach consensus about the question of whether the word ‘desk’ in English, referring to a piece of furniture, and its nearest translation equivalents in other languages should belong to the B1 level or not than whether accuracy of the pronunciation of English *bed* and *bad* or the control of auxiliary-subject-main verb in *Wh* questions in English (“When will you have finished your homework?”) belong to that level. Furthermore, I believe that it is more likely to reach consensus about receptive and productive lexical knowledge to be attained at the A1, A2 and B1 levels of the CEFR than for higher levels. Once standards for receptive and productive lexical knowledge at the A1, A2 and B1 levels have been established, many if not most of the practical problems in the teaching and testing of foreign languages in secondary education in Europe, as well as in adult education (the teaching of second languages to migrants and certification of L2 proficiency of adults) can be tackled and solved. Receptive and productive lexical knowledge of English at different CEFR levels has already been defined in great detail by one institution (without approval from a political or scientific authority), namely the English Vocabulary Profile (available on internet). This is an impressive and laudable feat in itself but

it illustrates the absence of guidance of the Council of Europe and the absence of involvement of specialists of other languages. If the English Language Profile were to obtain approval elsewhere in Europe (and in the English-speaking world), this document could gain the status of standard.

A more principled solution

Arguably, solving the problems of divergence requires empirical research, preferably based on theoretical insights. One of those theoretical insights is offered by my BLC-HLC theory. Research is needed on what adult native speakers of a given language have in common in terms of phonological, morphological, syntactic, lexical and pragmatic knowledge of their language in oral and written communication. Research will have to show whether this common knowledge comes close to the B1 level descriptions of the CEFR's activities listed in its Chapter 4 (see De Jong's (2004) definitions of quantity and quality quoted earlier in this paper).

Establishing which language skills adult L1-ers have in common and comparing these skills with CEFR descriptors in its activity scales, appears to me an entirely empirical matter, difficult but feasible to investigate. Corpus linguistics, using sophisticated analyses of corpora of spoken and written language, valid for the communicative situations mentioned in Chapter 4 of the CEFR, may well offer the main key to this more principled solution of the divergence threat to the CEFR, a matter of great educational importance. Using corpora and working from a usage-based approach to language use (Ellis & Robinson, 2008), it would then be possible to search not just for single-word units but, more interestingly, multiple-word units (n-grams). This would offer the opportunity to break down the artificial wall between grammar and lexis, established by older schools in linguistics. This enterprise requires international, between-language collaboration of (applied) linguists. The Council of Europe, provided that it is capable of establishing authority and credibility in the field, could help implement and monitor such international collaboration, preferably with the financial aid of the European Science Foundation or the EU's European Research Council. It would be fascinating to examine at which CEFR level the language proficiencies of adult native speakers begin to differ. Is, for a given language in a given country and with respect to listening, speaking, reading and writing separately, A2 the highest level shared by adult native speakers or do they share as much as B1? Our view of L2 proficiency at different CEFR levels might undergo some fundamental changes when we take differences in native speakers' language proficiency into account.

Summary, research agenda, and conclusion

The CEFR forms a major asset for second-language education in Europe and beyond. However, its empirical basis is restricted to judgments of descriptors passed by language teachers and other experts (North, 2007; North & Schneider, 1998). One would also like to see empirical support based on performance data of L2 learners. Furthermore, this paper has pointed at a number of conceptual problems, necessitating empirical research. A five-point research agenda is proposed around the following questions.

1. Do all L2 learners progress from one level to the next (with respect to all activities and competences distinguished in Chapter 4 and 5 of the CEFR) or is it possible to bypass lower CEFR levels? And is this true for both learners who do and those who do not receive L2 instruction in a school or other educational context?
2. To what extent can the CEFR profiles of advanced L2-ers actually be uneven?
3. How little phonological and morpho-syntactic competence is minimally required to perform speaking and writing tasks at the lower levels (A1, A2 and B1) in typologically different languages?
4. In a more fundamental approach to the construct of language cognition, research is needed on what adult native speakers of a given language have in common (called BLC in my theory) in terms of phonological, morphological, syntactic, lexical and pragmatic knowledge of their language in oral and written communication. Does this common knowledge come close to the B1 level descriptions of the CEFR's activities listed in its Chapter 4, even though Trim and Van Ek proposed the notion of a common core for L2 learners and not for L1-ers?

A major question underlying these issues is whether one should conceive of the notion of language proficiency in terms of a continuum or a dichotomy. The BLC-HLC theory (Hulstijn, 2011, in progress) proposes a dichotomous view of language cognition. If it is correct to say that the elements of lexis, morpho-syntax and pragmatics for a given language map on a Zipfian distribution, with few elements occurring very frequently and most elements occurring infrequently, then there is ground to hypothesize that control of these elements can be conceptualized as constituting a dichotomy. Of course, for each individual L1 and L2 learner, the acquisition process itself, i.e., the development of language proficiency, is gradual and this is true for both the acquisition of BLC and the acquisition of HLC. If BLC exists, I would argue that it forms a 'threshold' only for those learners who possess the intellectual abilities to move beyond this point.

As I argue in Hulstijn (in progress, Chapter 6), every theory is wrong, at least partially. We can use theories as strategic tools in helping us design empirical studies aimed at finding out where and how they are wrong. Trying to falsify a theory is one of the best ways of increasing our insight in the phenomena we seek to understand. I hope that the BLC-HLC theory will be perceived by some researchers as sufficiently intriguing to actually embark on empirical research testing its claims. It is high time that researchers of SLA, researchers of language assessment, and corpus linguists paid attention to each other's work and engaged in collaborative research, testing the linguistic, psycholinguistic, and sociolinguistic assumptions on which the CEFR is based.

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Author's address

Prof. Dr. Jan H. Hulstijn
University of Amsterdam
ACLCL
Spuistraat 134
NL-1012 VB Amsterdam
The Netherlands
j.h.hulstijn@uva.nl