

Common Reference Levels From Chapter 3

Criteria for descriptors for CRL

- 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.

Criteria: description issues (1)

- 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.

Criteria: description issues (2)

- 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.

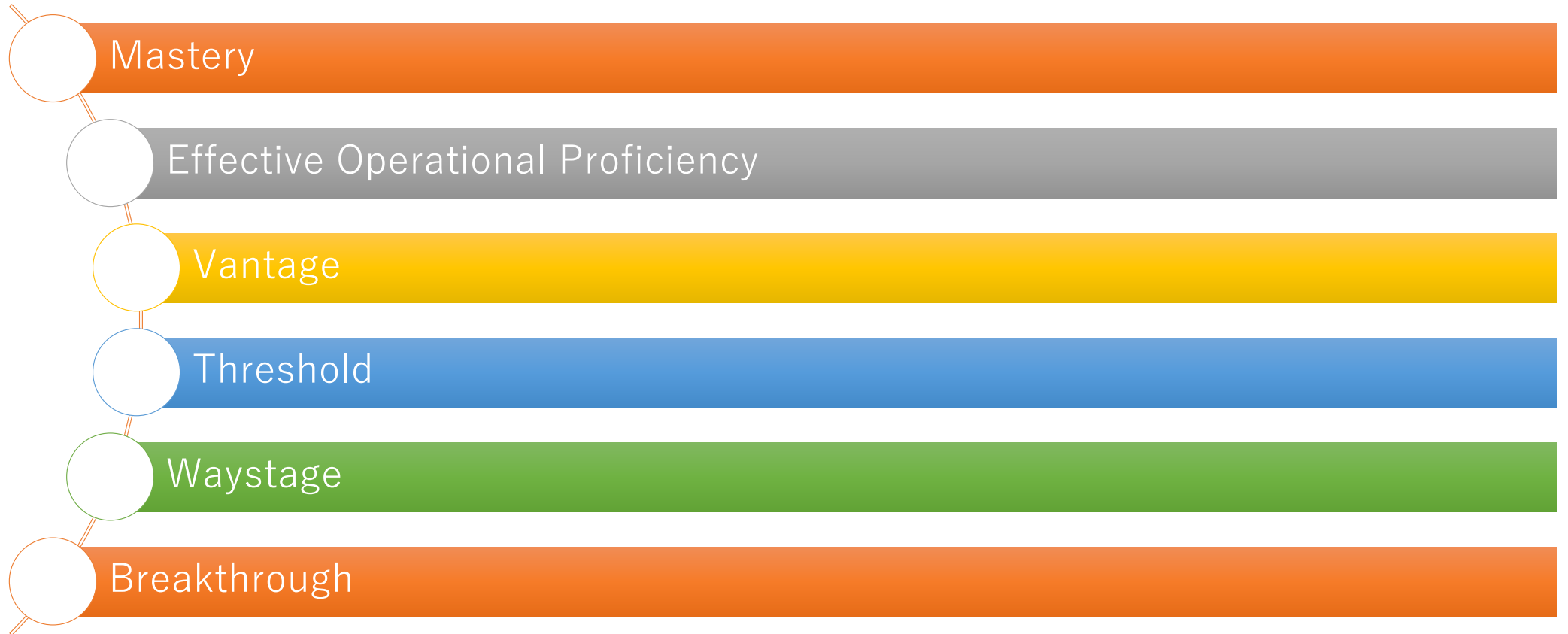
Criteria: Measurement issues

- 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.

Methodology used in developing the CRLs

- 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.

Common Reference Levels



Three broad levels: A, B and C

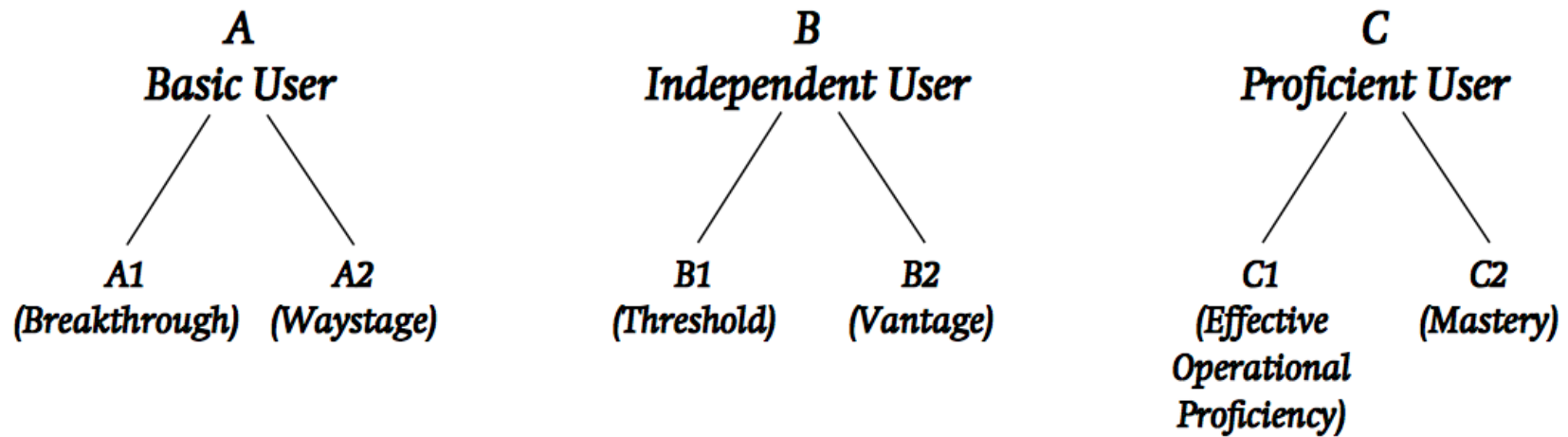


Figure 1

Presentation of CRLs

- 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 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:

Presentation of CRLs (2)

- 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.

Illustrative descriptors

- The descriptors refer to the following three metacategories in the descriptive scheme:
 1. *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.
 2. *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.

Illustrative descriptors (2)

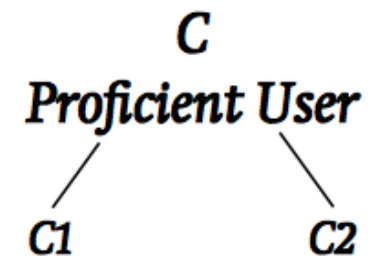
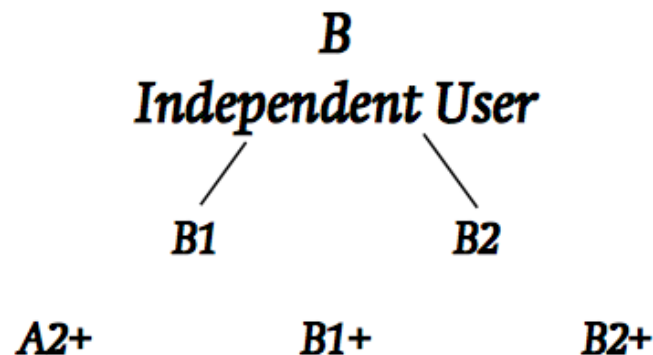
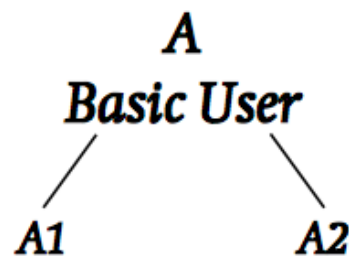
- *Communicative language competences*
 - Scaled descriptors are provided for aspects of **linguistic** competence and **pragmatic** competence, and for **sociolinguistic** competence. Certain aspects of competence do not seem to be amenable to definition at all levels; distinctions have been made where they have been shown to be meaningful.
- Descriptors need to remain holistic in order to give an overview; detailed lists of micro-functions, grammatical forms and vocabulary are presented in language specifications for particular languages (e.g. *Threshold Level 1990*). An analysis of the functions, notions, grammar and vocabulary necessary to perform the communicative tasks described on the scales could be part of the process of developing new sets of language specifications. General competences implied by such a module (e.g. Knowledge of the World, Cognitive skills) could be listed in similar fashion.

Flexibility in a branching approach (1)

- Below A1:
 - can make simple purchases where pointing or other gesture can support the verbal reference;
 - can ask and tell day, time of day and date;
 - can use some basic greetings;
 - can say yes, no, excuse me, please, thank you, sorry;
 - can fill in uncomplicated forms with personal details, name, address, nationality, marital status;
 - can write a short, simple postcard.
- The descriptors above concern ‘real life’ tasks of a tourist nature. In a school learning context, one could imagine a separate list of ‘pedagogic tasks’, including ludic aspects of language – especially in primary schools.

Flexibility in a branching approach (2)

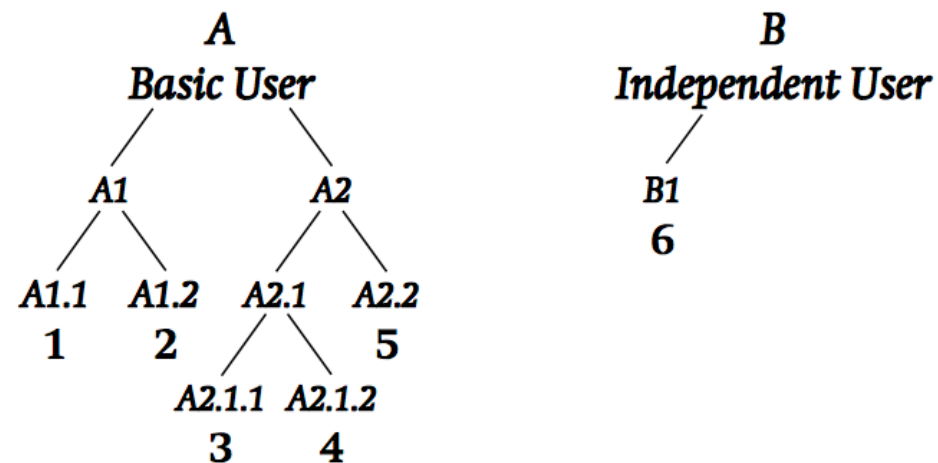
- Secondly, the Swiss empirical results suggest a scale of 9 more or less equally sized, coherent levels as shown in Figure 2. This scale has steps between A2 (*Waystage*) and B1 (*Threshold*), between B1 (*Threshold*) and B2 (*Vantage*), and between B2 (*Vantage*) and C1 (*Effective Operational Proficiency*). The possible existence of such narrower levels may be of interest in *learning* contexts, but can still be related to the broader levels conventional in *examining* contexts.



Flexibility in a branching approach (3)

Example 1:

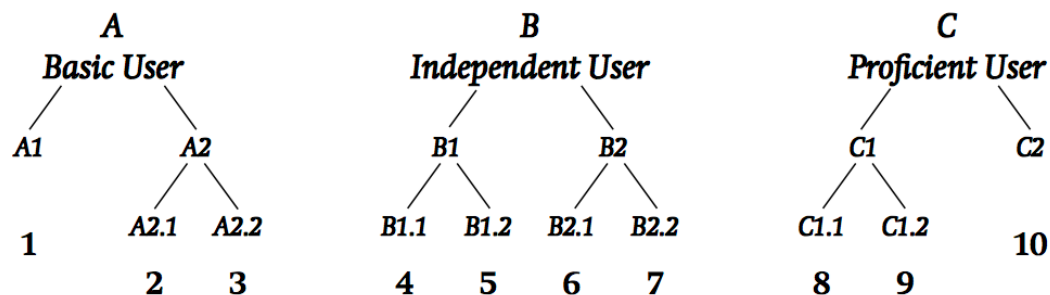
A primary to lower secondary school system, for example, or system for adult evening classes in which the provision of visible progress at low levels is felt necessary, could develop the *Basic User* stem to produce a set of perhaps six milestones with finer differentiation at **A2** (*Waystage*) where large numbers of learners would be found.



Flexibility in a branching approach (4)

Example 2:

In an environment for learning the language in the area where it is spoken one might tend to develop the *Independence* branch, adding a further layer of delicacy by subdividing the levels in the middle of the scale:



Example 3:

Frameworks for encouraging higher level language skills for professional needs would probably develop the *Proficient User* branch:

